Rinascere

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Rinascere

by The_Readers_Muse

Summary

It was a song about longing, longing for the mountains, the wide grassy plains, and a long awaited home-coming. It was about a far flung place that existed more in the singer's heart than in her memory. For it was a woman singing, he knew that much. A woman with a voice that was not perfect, but enchanting, alluring. And dare he say, familiar.

Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own NBC's "Hannibal" or Jerry Bruckheimer's "King Arthur," wishful thinking aside.

Authors Note #1: This is an AU/reincarnation fiction involving "Hannibal" and the movie "King Arthur," specially revolving around a romantic relationship between Hannibal (who is the reincarnation of Tristan) and Will Graham (who is the reincarnation of Galahad). This story was made possible by the following prompt on the Hannibal kinkmeme: "King Arthur and his knights were reborn to complete one last great mission. Arthur, who remembers his past life, starts tracking down and 'reminding' his knights, who don't remember, who they are. He finds each one in their respective lives and slowly bringing them back to themselves. Now he has all his knights but one. Galahad is still missing. But finally the knights have managed to track Galahad down and discovered that he is an FBI specialist called Will Graham. Realizing that he is of a difficult mental state, they decide to send in the one knight Galahad always trusted, his lover Tristan, who works to get close under the name of Hannibal Lecter. Slowly, Hannibal/Tristan uses his time with Will to try and bring Galahad back to them. So really just a story where the knights come looking for Will who they believe is really Galahad. And Hannibal is really their scout. Bonus: Tristan/Hannibal is still a cannibal. In their past life, food could be difficult to find and eating a dead human was a good way to survive. The others know but don't think anything of it.

Warnings: Contains spoilers for the movie, and just to be safe, all of Hannibal, season one. Contains adult language, canon appropriate violence, gore, murder, emotional manipulation, implied cannibalism and mature content.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Prologue

The earliest memory a child has is often uniform with the memories of its peers, like the curve of their mother's face or the rough brogue of a father's laugh. The fragments are general, simplistic, confined to basic shapes and singular flashes of a long forgotten memory - yet they are as ingrained into one's conscious mind as the lungs are to breathing.

He knew from a young age that he was the exception. For it was not his mother's face that he recalled, but a collection of musical notes. The original composition was a mystery to him. It was elusive, slippery, *muffled* - and had a tendency to devolve into static when he pushed too hard. It unraveled around him like an elegant tapestry whenever he took a carpet whip to the thin layer of dust that separated him from the true richness of its design.

It didn't matter how many hours he spent rifling through his thoughts, prodding his unconscious, sifting through memories best left undisturbed. He could never completely grasp it. It had gained notes as he'd matured, growing and shifting until musical tones and dramatic pauses had turned into words, a single line, then finally, a chorus. That was all he had, the chorus of a song that, despite his best efforts, appeared not to exist.

It was a song about longing, longing for the mountains, the wide grassy plains, and a long awaited home-coming. It was about a far flung place that existed more in the singer's heart than in her memory. For it was a woman singing, he knew that much. A woman with a voice that was not perfect, but enchanting, *alluring.* And dare he say, *familiar.*

And for some reason, it was soothing in a way that the memories of his parents, his Uncle, his sister – yes, even his beloved Mischa had never been.

It was as familiar as the taste of warm blood scorching across his tongue, trickling, velvet and sweet – yet he'd lived more than half his life bereft of the reason why.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Contains spoilers for the movie, and just to be safe, all of Hannibal, season one, adult language, canon appropriate violence, gore, murder, emotional manipulation, implied cannibalism, brief mention of pedophilia (for this chapter) and mature content.

"Jesus Tristan, I hope he at least deserved it."

It had been ten years since that moment, and he still remembered everything about it. He remembered its complexities and hidden pauses, the richness of his surprise and the cadence of his uncertainty. Even now, nearly a decade later, it still proved to be one of the most titillating bouquets of memory he'd ever had the fortune of experiencing. The mere elegance of it was still enough to send scores of heat arrowing down his spine, creating pleasure from the mundane - a performance out of sensation.

If he had to equate it to something, he would probably say that it reminded him of the first sip of a particularly exquisite bottle of dry Chianti. Bold and sweet against the tongue.

He recalled the pull of his shirt against his shoulders, the texture of the expensive silk as it sunk into the grooves of his spine - every muscle in his body suddenly pulling tight. The light breeze ghosted across his skin, flirting with the muted scents of stale urine and fresh vomit that were still issuing from the limp body underneath him - spread-eagled across a naturally flat stone in the center of a secluded clearing.

It had been an irresistible stage, well worth the effort of an extended chase. The only thing it needed was actors. That was where Ronald came in.

Mr. Ronald K. Jefferson was, according to the law, a fine, upstanding American citizen. He had no outstanding warrants, a single speeding ticket in over four decades of driving and had never once failed to file his taxes. Medically speaking, he was in the best shape of his life and was a regular donor of blood and plasma at his local blood bank. Off paper, he was supporting a young mistress in an expensive condo in Los Angeles while his wife of twenty years was often left alone with three boys for weeks at a time as her hard working husband 'traveled across country for business trips.' But perhaps more pointedly, Mr. Jefferson was an undocumented pedophile with a penchant for little girls, most recently five year old Jessica Stanton. A tiny, leggy little thing with dark curls and a gap toothed smile – already buried in a shallow grave just five miles from her parent's townhouse. The case was still making headlines across the state. No one had found the body – yet.

He also had a rather unfortunately habit of talking loudly on his cell phone while attending the cinema. But he supposed that in light of the man's other crimes, that was neither here nor

there.

Now, Mr. Ronald K. Jefferson was naked, stripped and arranged to mimic Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* – his arms stretched out to represent the square depicted in the famous sketch while the severed arms of Mrs. Elizabeth Swanson, who unfortunately could not join them for their festivities that evening, represented the circle. Her legs, fleshy and pallid, already superimposed between his to complete this version of the renowned piece.

The scene was set, *perfect*, despite the fact that they were sixty miles away from any inhabited areas and three from the nearest road. He'd wanted to take his time with Mr. Jefferson. He'd wanted to *enjoy* him. And he had. He'd stolen the weight of the man's last breath and claimed it as his own. His hand wrapped firmly around Jefferson's still beating heart as he'd stroked him from the inside out, in a parody of a cardio vascular massage. The way each rib had spread underneath his hands, blood slick and heaving, had been a near hedonistic experience.

Natural design, geometry, ideal human proportions – humanity at its most basic, the metallic tang of blood on his tongue – was their anything better?

Even when the man had lost the ability to scream, he'd never once looked away. His eyes, hazel and blood-shot, refused to leave his attacker's face. Riveted, even as his own blood had speckled across their cheeks. And while it wasn't necessary, he'd certainly appreciated the sentiment.

He remembered the way he'd stopped breathing, pulse hitching, jumping for a few discomforting seconds before it smoothed - like a falcon ruffling its feathers, graceful and calm. He remembered the hiss of air he'd sucked in, the sound starkly contrasted against the chuckles that had echoed through the clearing at his back.

…Interrupted, sexual tension unrealized, rude…

He remembered the irritation he'd felt at being interrupted, his hackles up – threatening. The surprise of being discovered melding together with the sensation of warm blood trickling between his fingers, slicking the grip of his scalpel as his spine stiffened. He kept his back to them on principal, his body a canvas of hard lines as he closed his eyes - letting his senses tell him what he was facing before he turned.

It was only when he faced them that irritation and uncertainty morphed into idle curiosity. His expression showed nothing of his thoughts as an inner smile tipped the scales – with the possibility of a new game, a new amusement, a new *challenge* being enough to catch his interest.

A different kind of prey.

A group of five had ringed around him, coming completely out of the shadows as he turned, scalpel glinting at his side, blood splattered and smeared. His hair was feathered across his temples, shadowing his eyes, but he resisted the urge to smooth it back. It was the first time anyone had ever taken him by surprise. He hadn't even heard them.

The man who had spoken was tall, bald and barrel chested. His voice deep, raspy and British, accompanied by a dark little chuckle that immediately set his teeth on edge. *He knew that laugh.*

He inclined his head slightly. There was no fear, anger, surprise, or disgust there. In fact, the man's tone was almost appreciative, like killing was a spectator sport and they were the encore. The thought alone was alluring.

The blood dripping off the flat stone behind him became a stream, *a river*, trickling and red. It was rhythmic – yet cacophonous, unique, beautiful, *better*.

His audience approved.

He observed the others critically. They were all roughly the same age, Caucasian, well dressed, capable, fit, each a touch exotic in their own way. He sized them up, mapping out their intricacies as they stood in uniform, winged out two strong on either side of a tall man with dark curls and a roman nose.

Because the man who'd first spoken was not the leader, that much was obvious. Each of the five was capable of it, of course, of greatness, but they deferred to the man that crowned the center of their half circle all the same. There was history there, loyalty and love that ran deeper than anything else he'd ever experienced. Discomfort itched, rare and unwelcome between his shoulder blades.

He was missing something.

His suspicions were only confirmed when the man himself stepped forward - smiling, his expression wry and anticipatory as he took him in unabashedly. Like the man knew something he did not.

"It's been a long time my friend."

His fingers tightened around the scalpel.

Chapter 3

He thought quickly, schemes and plans falling in and out of favor before he finally settled on honesty - one of the more morally uniform, if not slightly *underused*, options in his arsenal.

"While I can assure you that he did," he began, nodding towards the limp flesh behind him, "I am afraid you have me mistaken with someone else."

He inclined his head slightly as he took them in, observing, finding himself inexplicably curious as to what would happen next. He could sense no threat from them. No malice or ill will despite their body language, which undoubtedly promised it. They were eager, on edge, yet by all appearances, had no intention of hurting him. Not in any of the more conventional ways at least.

Yet that didn't stop him from tensing when the man in the center stepped forward. He held his ground, expression unaffected. But the hand holding the scalpel twitched.

The leader only smiled, clever and warm.

"You know me as Arthur, as *Artorius Castus* - the last commander of Hadrian's wall," he began, his voice deadly calm, *serious*, as one of his men, tall and lithe with dark hair and a goatee, shifted restlessly beside him.

The man – Arthur, was a natural leader, a natural speaker. *Gifted. Confident.* And unlike the bald man, his accent was a mixture of old English and soft Italian. It was subtle, with only the stresses on the vowels giving his mixed heritage away, but detectable man had taste, style, *breeding*. From his words to his suit – which was expensive, professionally fitted and French - the man had a pedigree. *Thoroughbred.*

He was an intellectual with a body of a warrior – *curious.*

"My men, your brothers - Lancelot, Gawain, Bors and Dagonet," he continued, letting a hand sweep out to encompass the others, words stirring and passionate as he recited the names of legend. A thought rose up, veiled and uncertain. *They were two short. The Circle was incomplete.*

He blinked, suddenly understanding. Tristan, Welsh for 'the noise of arms' or 'the song of a sword', French for sorrow - renowned in Arthurian legend as the name of one of the Knights of the Round Table. *Round, because for men to be men they must first all be equal.*

If he were anyone else he might have laughed.

"We have been searching for you for a long time, brother," Arthur murmured, so sincere he wanted to carve another smile into the man's face and watch as it seeped out. Wondering, off-handedly what insanity tasted like.

"I assume, since you followed me, you know what I do. In fact, I am sure of it," he began, choosing his words carefully before continuing. Letting the moonlight filter across his face as a blanket of mist rose up around them, filtering in from the marshes to the east.

He couldn't have asked for a better stage.

"But, despite that...*lack* of manners, I would be happy to refer you, all of you, to a very respectable psychologist. She has just started her own practice, quite the bright young woman – a rarity in the field," he replied, tone heady with amusement, dark and bitter around the edges as he inhaled – taken aback when he realized that the scent of blood had faded, overwrought with the aroma of old leather and horse sweat.

He shook himself, trying to regain his center, but the scent remained. *It was carved under his skin, ingrained – permanent.*

Laughter rose up in the interim, genuine and deep. The kind unique to a group of men who'd spent the majority of their lives in each other's company – tested and strong.

"You always were the practical one, Tristan, I'll give 'ya that," Bors chuckled, running a hand across his closely shorn head as he elbowed the silent man at his side, Dagonet, companionably.

"Tristan…" The name rolled off his tongue unbidden, familiar. The group stilled, looking up at him expectantly, *waiting.*

And for reasons beyond him, a growl rose up in his throat.

Chapter 4

"Are you familiar with the concept of reincarnation, Doctor Lecter?" the man called Arthur asked. His hands were posed behind his back, the picture of ease and confidence as he caught his eye through the gloom.

The use of his true name was not lost on him; it was an attempt to sooth, placate and distract. It was a classic, if not blatant tactic, something done to give the subject the illusion of equality and equal footing. Something more suited to gentling a wild animal or consoling a half-feral child than a fully grown man. But he didn't react, content to let the man believe he'd begun to win him over.

"Who is not?" he countered, politely curious despite the fact that just underneath his skin, separated by a few millimeters of spider-thin tendons and living flesh, his blood *seethed.*

"We have been brought back, all of us, for a final mission. Something preordained by God and-" Arthur began, only to be cut off by the dark haired man at his side - all harried impatience and well-meant frustration as Lancelot rolled his eyes into the mist.

"I don't know why you even bother with this bit, Arthur," Lancelot interjected. "It makes us sound like a bunch of mentals no matter how many fancy words you decide to stick in or how delicate you try to put it," mirroring his thoughts exactly as Lancelot shook his head. There was no heat to the man's words however, only humor and a good natured sort of ribbing that was so familiar it *hurt.*

Gawain snorted out a laugh, crooked fingers running through his long brown hair as he tied it back into a thin pony tail – his expression alive with mirth and careful patience.

"They never believe it anyway," Lancelot continued, earning himself a round of nods from the others and a knowing look from his leader.

"Let Arthur say his piece," Dagonet interjected. "If the man is to come back to us, it must be on his own terms."

"It was my duty to protect you, to defend and value your lives above my own. And if you did perish, it was my duty to live my life gloriously in battle, in honor of your memory. I failed in part of that duty and for that I am sorry. Your love for me, your loyalty, as well as Lancelot's and Dagonet's, led to your death – taken from us in the heat of battle - on the very eve of your long awaited freedom," Arthur explained, expression inexplicably softening as he met his gaze, eyes distant – like he was watching something play out in his mind's eye.

And perhaps the madness was catching because suddenly he was there, perhaps not in the same memory, but one so similar that it very well could have been. His spine stiffened, nerves tingling just underneath the skin as his body remembered the sting of steel as it had slipping through his skin – teasing his exposed flesh as the cries of his brothers rose up in the distance. He remembered the soft sound that had issued from his lips – his mouth lax with surprise as the cry had rolled out, deep and breathy as his heartbeat slowed. Somewhere close

by a horse was screaming, whinnying as blood feathered across his face. There was a man standing in front of him, wild and painted – a warrior out of time – the wildling raised his sword and then – darkness.

He rocked back on his heels, catching himself before the emotions racing through him could make it to his face. It was the analytical portion of his brain that saved him then, too intent on classifying the psychosis to spare any thought for the images still flashing behind his closed lids. Memories that were not memories, they couldn't be.

This was a *Folie à deux, madness shared by two* - or in his case, seven - a *Folie à plusieurs, a 'madness of many'.* It was a shared psychosis, nothing more, a psychiatric syndrome where the symptoms of a delusional belief are transmitted by the primary inducer – the Folie imposée – to others, known as the Folie simultanée. For the secondary subject the treatment was often simple, anti-psychotics and immediate separation from the original patient. But for the Folie imposée, his eyes automatically flicked over to Arthur, the treatment was usually far more…*severe.*

"I owe you a debt my friend, one I intend to repay," Arthur intoned. The words were so firm, so sure, that a damning shiver trickled up his spine, finding it odd that regardless of how ridiculous the man sounded, he didn't doubt him in the least.

The silence grew still, stagnant – uncomfortable. But he refused to give the man the satisfaction he craved. The satisfaction of having to ask what he meant. *It was a stalemate.*

Bors made a bored sound in the back of his throat. "Christ, I'm going to be old and grey by the time you lot get through with him. Just tell him and be done with it. It can't be any worse than what happened when you came for me," the big man snorted, huffing out a laugh that was at odds with his words.

He raised a brow, sensing a story there. Bors just grinned. *He didn't have to say a word.*

"Apparently the world can't take a piss unless one of us is holding its unmentionables – we're basically reincarnated nursemaids, bloody fantastic and all that," Bors continued, words riddled through with sarcasm and a rather unhealthy measure of self-importance as he made to continue.

"I came after them with a drainage pipe, when they found me. Knocked my arse clean out then tossed me right in the moor," Bors explained, tone almost conversational, like he'd told this story a dozen times before and now found it no more remarkable than a recitation of the day's weather. "We made so much ruckus that someone rang Scotland Yard. By the time the coppers found us –" gesturing off towards Arthur, Lancelot and Gawain, "we were hip-deep in muck and shit trying to strangle the daylights out of each other."

"It wasn't until they'd found Dagonet and decided to try again that everything fell into place. No jail time required, the bloody idiots," he grinned, slapping Dagonet on the back, expression undeniably fond as the corners of Arthur's lips twitched, his dark eyes smiling.

He stamped down on the urge to return the gesture, uncertain of where the emotion came from in the first place. Already mentally back stepping as the others chimed in.

"You always were a bit thick," Gawain laughed, ducking the man's playful smack just in time as even Dagonet finally cracked a smile.

Something tickled, niggling and squirming on the edge of his awareness, something that told him that this was familiar – *right.* Something that told him that he knew this, *them* – and that this moment had played out a thousand times before, wreathed in the haze of wood smoke and ancient sweat.

But that was impossible. He knew it was impossible, and yet-

Reality stuttered. He breathed, shocky and ill-timed. But rationality – logic, was quick to push it away. It was a flaw in the design, an imp in the engine, a ghost in the machine, nothing more.

He was letting himself get distracted.

Chapter 5

He was already counting down, his free hand smoothing the neat line of his trousers, idly caressing a splotch of blood that had soaked in to the expensive threads, when, like clockwork, Ronald Jefferson's cell phone suddenly rang.

It startled all of them save for himself. The sound was muffled through the neat pile of clothing he'd left folded on the ground – yet clearly audible in the sudden quiet. It was a canned Hawaiian luau, gross and flashy - Mrs. Jefferson's ringtone. It was their usual 10pm goodnight, a custom they kept whenever he was working out of state. Only this time Ronald had never made it to the airport.

She wouldn't suspect anything for at least another few days and he'd already taken the liberty of contacting the airport. No one even knew he was missing. His wife would call the police on the third day, his mistress, the day after. He only wished he could see their faces when they were finally introduced. *Hell hath no fury, indeed.*

He almost smiled at the others' discomfort. It was the first time he'd seen them unbalanced since they'd turned the tables on him. The range of emotions that flashed across their faces was delicious to behold, a full spectrum of emotion that ranged from apathy to a bastardized form of guilt.

Ronald's phone beeped again, the screen flashing. *1 new message.*

"Do you know why it is that you do what you do?" Arthur asked, breaking the silence easily as he smoothed the cuffs of his dress shirt, his movements precise - immaculate.

His tongue came out to wet his lips, about to speak. But the man held up a hand. "I'm not asking for a psychoanalytic answer, doctor. I want to know why it is you think you do what you do," Arthur clarified, his gaze hard and uncompromising, suddenly every inch the commander he claimed to be.

His amusement evaporated.

A thought flashed through his mind, random and close, a near miss. Something bathed in blood and an honest sweat, something that told him that it had only been when he'd been bleeding that he'd *truly* been alive.

Because I like it, because it reminds me of-

The words were on the tip of his tongue but for some reason he couldn't say it. Not because he was ashamed of course, he'd never been ashamed of what he was. That would defeat the purpose. It was because of who was asking.

This Arthur had managed to throw him off-balance in a way few ever had. He felt disturbingly off keel with the man. The power dynamics were skewed, *conflicted*. No, *he* was conflicted.

He blinked, recognizing the emotion rising in his breast for what it was - *uncertainty*. He didn't like it.

A hiss of breath caught between his teeth when he realized that the man had been watching him the entire time, close, suffocating, circling. He should have expected nothing less. The man was like a predator making tracks around his wounded prey, lazy and confident. *Like he believed the game was already won.*

A rare sheen of anger rose up in the back of his throat as he watched the man watch him. Something happened when their eyes met, a fusion of sorts, but neither of them seemed inclined to back down. The others remained silent.

"There is a war going on inside of you, a battle fought between mind and soul – reality and memory. Everything you see, everything you taste, touch and hear is telling you that you are anchored *here*. That you exist *here*. But despite everything your eyes tell you, it has never been that simple, has it?" Arthur demanded, his palms open at his sides, body language alive with supplication and eagerness.

But it only made him want to rip into the man's throat, to sink his teeth deep into that soft, vulnerable flesh and tease out all the lies. He wanted to disprove everything the man was spouting, drag it out into the light and hang him with it, just like he had with Ronald, with Mrs. Stanton and countless others.

Pigs.

But this man was different. *Better.* His thumb traced down the side of the scalpel, imagining how he'd do it as his fingers trailed across the expensive steel - blood slick and warm. There were so many options, so many dramas he had yet to play. But perhaps simplicity was the best card to wield, considering the circumstances, something effective and familiar, but still satisfying. After all, slicing him down, layer by layer until silence was the only thing left to him did hold a certain appeal.

He'd carve him hollow; *carve him empty*, just like his promises.

"You have lived your entire life on the outside, out of sync. Watching, waiting, but never quite fitting in. Like the answer to a question that has remained just out of your reach, life has always left you dissatisfied – incomplete," Arthur continued, taking another cautious step forward when he remained motionless. "We have all felt that way, all of us have been where you are now."

His lip curled.

"And I have that answer. The answer to the question that up until tonight you didn't even know you'd been seeking. All you need to do now is ask," Arthur stated, voice a base-line thrum as he extended a hand out before him, almost as if the man actually expected him to take it.

"Madness is like gravity – even to the well-ordered mind, all it takes is a little push," he pointed out, voice unaccountably rough after the long pause, eying the man's hand with

undisguised disdain.

"I have *never* lied to you and I don't intend to start now," Arthur replied. "As for sanity and delusion, for what is real and what is not, well, I will not pretend to be unbiased. And I certainly won't tell you what to believe. That is not my decision to make. But what I will say is this, what is more real? The life that you live now or the life you live when you dream? You know the ones, when you wake up in a cold sweat, still riding the high from some half-forgotten landscape, your blood singing – soul *soaring* - the laughter of your brothers echoing in your ears, melded together with the pull of old leather and the shrill scrape of forged steel swinging at your side? Is it wrong to believe that that life could be just as real as the one you are living now?"

There it was, that honesty again, the man reeked of it. There was no falsehood or ill intent behind his words, nothing that hinted at any darkness that lurked just underneath. The man knew, no, the man *believed* every word he said. There was conviction there, assurance, and despite the fact that he knew the difference between reality and fantasy, he couldn't fathom why the man's words had any effect on him at all.

His posture shifted and suddenly he realized that his fists were clenched tightly at his sides. *Defensive.*

"We understand how it sounds," Lancelot assured, carrying on where Arthur had left off. "It was different for all of us. Snatches of memory, things we couldn't explain, skills, instincts, reactions. Memories of people we'd never met – none of it made sense until Arthur found us."

"You've spent your entire life wondering why, explaining it away and suppressing it. Yes, even *you*," Lancelot continued, insistent now, trying to sway him, delay him as Arthur eyed him from across the close space. Considering, thinking, planning.

"Even now, you know us. We are familiar, you can't place us, but you *know*," Dagonet added, voice gentle, calming even as the situation began to devolve. Like a hawk circling, searching for its prey, all that was left was the long fall.

"And we know you." Gawain added, ferocity and conviction broiling just under the surface as the others nodded – an irrepressible force that was hemming him in from all sides.

His jaw clenched, muscles tensing just underneath the skin as he held his ground. Pride and sadism keeping his feet firmly planted as the man called Arthur took a step forward and then another. So close he could smell the scent of him, a mixture of base sweat and expensive cologne, eagerness and crushed pine.

He bit down on the inside of his cheek until the taste of iron swept across his tongue – desperate to steady himself. But that only made it worse, because suddenly-

A body moved underneath him, coltish and young. A man with a mop of dark brown curls and a smooth, curving back that seemed to stretch out forever, naked and glossed with sweat. His hips thrusted forward, arcing in a series of slow, sharp little snaps that had the man underneath him *begging*. His partner's calloused hands curled around his forearms as the boy

pleaded, trying to get him to turn them over so that he could *see* – the man wanted to see his face when he came.

His boy.

Only he didn't move, instead he whispered filth in the man's ear as he bent down, fisting a handful of his dark curls. The boy clenched around his cock, likely in a misguided attempt for retribution that ended up backfiring on both of them spectacularly. Because it only made him shove the man *deeper* into the pile of furs they were nested in. His lover's pulse was pounding through his skin in a beautiful staccato beat as he yanked the man back onto his forearms by his hair, sucking a line of brutal kisses across the cords of his neck as the boy nearly *hiccuped* in pleasure.

It was a deflowering. The boy was ripe. Overeager. He could barely restrain himself.

"Tristan, *Tristan* please… I want to see-"

He rolled them deeper into the furs, but kept the man on his belly. The glimpses of the man's face as he tried to turn, tried to *watch*well fucked. He probably wasn't even aware of the noises he was making anymore; his pleads and mewls as he ground himself deep into the man's ass. His rump was pert, rippling with each thrust, *inviting*. He couldn't help but spread the man's cheeks, watching as his cock split the boy apart, his hole sloppy and well-used, red and stretched around him as he smacked the boy's flank for good measure. Watching as the force of his blow colored the man's cheeks.

So pretty, his boy.

One of the horses whickered softly; just outside of the small hut they'd taken shelter in for the night – hobbled and grazing. But he paid it no mind, because his boy was almost there. He could almost taste him shattering – breaking open as he moved inside him. The man was whining now, well past the point of pleads and demands, one hand sneaking underneath him as he stripped his cock – grunting into the furs as he tightened around him – close. He gritted his teeth in an effort to hold back his own release, not content to spill until his lover had reached his own.

"Tristan I-"

The boy's name exploded from his tongue as his balls suddenly tightened, surprising them both when it was pulled out of his throat unbidden, a raw growl of sound and syllables that ended up doing them both in. Because a second later he was rewarded with a shout and the sensation of the boy convulsing around him before his eyes rolled back in his head – losing himself inside him.

Galahad.

His eyes fluttered shut, bliss and uncertainty melding together in an explosive cocktail of two intertwining realities that were slowly becoming one. Gooseflesh shivered up his skin, puckering the flesh on his arms, teasing the hairs despite the warmth of the room.

Impossible.

His tongue swiped across his lower lip, barely able to suppress a shiver. Every action became sensuous and tactile as pleasure centers lit up across his skin - like the very memory was somehow wired into his nervous system. Heat rushed to his face, the precursor to arousal, he bit down on the urge to turn away, to keep something of the moment to himself – private. But something of it must have shown on his face because Arthur was moving again, now just meters away with a question on his lips.

And quite suddenly, the entire affair, which had so enamored him in the beginning, abruptly ceased to be interesting.

Chapter 6

Heat spread through him, fast like a fever, *a blush*. His gorge rose up in the back of his throat, saliva stretched thin in his mouth, oily. He felt faint, his head was pounding. Everything was too loud, too much-

He swallowed hard, tasting bile. The remnants of his evening meal threatened to repeat itself as he tried to center himself, his tongue flooded with the aftertaste of a particularly exquisite Choucroute garnie – now sullied with the tang of saliva and watered down stomach acids.

Such a waste.

The others were talking, *making noise*, telling him how they'd found him, how they'd known it was him, how they'd followed him and waited, biding their time until he was theirs to court. But he wasn't listening. He felt overstimulated, *over-saturated.*

His best laid plans were crumbling.

It was a unique experience watching one of his machinations fail, rare. It left him feeling dissatisfied, singular. *Unfulfilled.* The pleasure he'd felt at taking Ronald Jefferson's life, of *elevating him*, had turned to ashes in his mouth. They had done this, Arthur and the others - ruining one of his most decadent hunts with their poisonous words and false promises. And worse, they almost had him believing it, that they, that *he* could really be-

His pulse echoed in his ears, heart beat thrumming at his temples. Fast, *too fast*. He struggled to regain control of himself and the situation, but found it illusive. *Gauche.*

Static hissed across his vision and suddenly he found himself in a different place - a stranger to the words coming out of his lips as a memory, half-shrouded and dark, played out on the edge of his conscious mind. His hair was long, braided and hanging in front of his eyes. His knife carved into the softness of an apple, succulent and tart, just one of the handful he'd snatched from one of the serving girls a few minutes before - a redhead with summer curls and a freckled nose.

The young man from before, *Galahad*, was throwing knives with a long-haired and bearded Gawain, teasing the boy companionably when he missed his mark by a finger's length. His own hand moved, so fast he barely had time to register, aiming deftly the second before the knife flew from his grip, sinking dead center into the soft bone handle of the blade that Galahad had just buried into the chair leg.

"Tristan!" the man exclaimed, his tone a mixture of exasperation, awe and surprise as he whirled to face him. His dark curls were wild around his face, lips ale-slick and enticing as the sound of laughter echoed around them.

"How do you do that?" Gawain demanded, arm wrapped around the waist of a pretty, dark haired thing, the butcher's daughter. The woman had lately taken to hanging around whenever they returned from a mission. Gawain had already had her twice and neither of them seemed

keen to leave it at that, regardless of the looks they'd *all* started to get from her father whenever they dropped off their meat to dress after a hunt.

Gawain always had tended to think with his cock before his brain.

"I aim for the middle," he replied, smirking around his slice of apple as Gawain simply stared at him, unsure if he was being serious or if he was making a fool of him.

A surprisingly genuine smile spread across his lips as he leaned back, catching Galahad's eye from behind the curtain of his long, dark brown hair, the tartness of wild apple flowing across his tongue as Bors' voice suddenly rose above the din.

"Shut up!" the man roared, dragging his woman out from the ale hut, with his latest child, a healthy boy of only a few months born while they were off patrolling the northern borders, held half-hazardly in her arms.

"Vanora will sing!" he declared, eyes warm with pride as everyone's attention was diverted from their own affairs. Even the *click-click* from the dicing tables was quickly muted. Only the newly arrived Romans looked confused as to why. Vanora's talents, as well as her fiery temper, were almost legend. Bors was a lucky man to have ensnared such a woman.

"Sing about home!" Galahad urged, taking a long swallow of ale as Vanora finally allowed herself to be pulled out into the middle of the courtyard, an embarrassed smile lighting up her face as she held the babe to her breast, rocking him.

The air was still when she began to sing, anticipatory. He leaned up against a wooden beam, listening. His fingers slackened around the knife in his hand as she began to sing.

"…Land of bear and land of eagle, land that gave us birth and blessing. Land that called us ever homewards, we will go home across the mountains. We will go home, we will go home. We will go home across the mountains…"

The world narrowed. Galahad's eyes were shining, longing, as a foreign yet strangely familiar emotion stirred in his breast. *Home.*

He nearly stumbled, wrenching himself back to the present with the force of a near physical blow. Recognition *seared* – because he knew that song, it was from that same smattering collection of notes that he'd coveted all his life, a broken melody from a song that wasn't supposed to exist.

His stomach churned, thoughts confused, as his tongue darted out, unconsciously trying to capture the lingering taste of wild apple on his lips. There had been something appealing about the bitter tart, something familiar in the way the flesh had crumbled under the press of his tongue, so soft that the thin slices had almost disintegrated before he could swallow.

He ground his teeth. *No. This wasn't right. It couldn't be true, that was imposs-*

Snatches of words, half remembered from his time in boarding school, reeled through his mind. The memories became jumbled, interchangeable with his studies at John Hopkins and

his first forays into psychoanalysis when he decided trade in his scalpel for a pen. *Nothing happens in contradiction to nature, it is our views that change and the impact we have on nature itself. Reality should be linear, definite. But it wasn't. Not now, not then, not ever. Lies are the swan song that a confident man lacks. Nothing was set-*

He shuddered. He didn't understand. Something was wrong. He couldn't think, he couldn't-

Chapter 7

Reality shifted once more and suddenly he was surrounded by his brothers, brushing shoulders with Dagonet and Lancelot as Arthur made to speak, his face grim, stony, as Galahad and Bors tried to convince him to join them in their cups.

"Knights, brothers in arms, your courage has been tested beyond all limits. But I must ask you now for one further trial."

"Drink!" Bors added, completely misunderstanding or not wanting to - making Galahad snort into his jug of ale, the honey-brown liquor trickling down his chin as the expression on his youthful face slowly started to change.

"We must leave on a final mission for Rome - before our freedom can be granted." Arthur finished, mouth a stern line across his face, a slash, *a wound* as his hands curled into fists at his sides.

He looked on expressionless as his brothers' laughter slowed, eventually falling silent as Arthur made to speak. Unlike the others, he was already prepared. The moment the bishop had requested a private audience, he'd known. Rome was not done with them yet.

"Above the wall, far to the north, there is Roman family in need of rescue. They are trapped by Saxons. Our orders are to secure their safety," Arthur explained.

His calloused tips paused in mid-slice, the sharpness of his blade sinking deep into the apple in his palm. He chewed slowly, deliberately, as he watched the others react, uncertain of his own emotions as Gawain laughed and turned away. It was not a pleasant sound, more disgusted than anything, as their night of celebration turned to ashes in their mouths.

The Romans had never been good at keeping their promises. He supposed that was what great power afforded you, the ability to break your own vows – yet punish those that attempted to do the same. The Pope must be a very complex man. A symbol of virtue and truth, the veritable right hand of the Christian god, yet also a man that offers death in the place of life and calls it preordained. A man that sends others to die for his God and the glory of Rome, yet does not join them in battle. A man who lies to young Sarmatian boys and then asks them to spill the blood of thousands in the name of progress and faith.

"Let the Romans take care of their own," Bors grated, still seeing hope in the impossible.

He threaded the knife between his fingers. After fifteen years doing the bidding of Rome, a grand nation none of them had ever seen, they should have expected that even something as simple as a discharge would not be granted so easily.

"Above the wall is wild territory," Gawain pointed out, seeing the mission for what it was as the curious crowd at their back began to swell with conversation. By dawn, everyone in the encampment would know what Rome was demanding.

"Our duty to Rome, if it was ever a duty, is *done*. Our pact with Rome is *done*," Galahad spat, youthful bitterness coloring his words. There was censure in Galahad's eyes, betrayal, too wrapped up in his own hurts to see that they were not the only ones who had been deceived. Arthur had no part in this. He was half Roman, one of their own, and they'd dealt him the same hand.

"Every knight here has laid his life on the line for you. For you. And instead of freedom, you want what? *More* blood? *Our* blood! You think more of Roman blood then you do of ours?!" Bors roared, almost drowning out the sound of his child squalling in the crowd behind them – picking up on the cadence of his father's voice.

But he only had eyes for Galahad, watching as the flames licked around the edges of his boyish dreams through the long fringe of his hair. Irritation scored through him as he watched the expression on the man's face devolve, his lip curled, so easily broken.

Playing the surly child did not suit him.

"Bors! These are our orders. We leave at first light and when we return your freedom will be waiting for you. A freedom we can embrace with honor," Arthur declared, clearly attempting to salvage the situation before Bors spoke right over him.

"I'm a free man! I will choose my own fate!" he yelled, a film of tears blurring his vision as he turned away. The man's rage and disappointment were almost too much to bear as the crowd, both Briton and Roman, murmured quietly.

Galahad was looking anywhere but at him, avoiding him. Their argument from a few nights before was still fresh on both their minds; they hadn't visited each other's beds since.

"Yeah, yeah, we are all going to die someday. If it is a death from a Saxon hand that frightens you, stay home," he replied, raising a slice of apple to his lips as Galahad whirled around to face him.

That did it.

"Listen, if you're so eager to die. You can die right now!" Galahad yelled, angry and hurt as he held his ground, watching the man from between his long braids as rage propelled him forward.

"Enough, enough!" Lancelot yelled, pushing Galahad back as the younger man continued.

"I've got something to live for!"

The implication behind the man's words were as heady as they were clear. Galahad knew he had no plans beyond tomorrow, no desire for a life lived apart from the battlefield. It was the very cause of their original argument. Galahad had never understood that and likely never would. They were two sides of the same coin, but just different enough to be set apart.

They were words meant to wound, words that meant more underneath than they did on the surface. Galahad was angry, hurt. Not just at Rome and Arthur, but at him. Angry because he

didn't share the dreams that he did. Angry because in the nights that might follow this moment, if any of them survived, he might be a hundred miles from the warmth of their bed. By their very natures, each of them was unable to follow in the others footsteps, regardless of how much they might want to.

That reality wasn't going to change, final mission or no.

He caught the man's eye from across the circle. His gaze was dark and fathomless as the younger man met his stare, chin up and defiant in a way he'd usually take him to task for later, bleeding the impudence out of him until only submission and naked want remained. Until he had the very heart of him in his hands, wringing the man's pleasure out of him again and again, his hand tight around the boy's throat until he was over-stimulated and whimpering.

The hand gripping the knife tightened, craving the feeling of the man's skin sliding underneath his.

"The Romans have broken their word," Dagonet cut in, voice steady and calm, soothing the other's tempers like a balm as even the crowd at their back stilled, listening. "We have the word of Arthur. That is good enough. I'll prepare."

When he looked up, Galahad was still staring at him. His expression was conflicted, colored with both a challenge and an apology as Dagonet called to Bors and the group parted ways. He followed, striding next to Dagonet as Bors left to find Vanora. He spent the night alone. He didn't see Galahad again until dawn.

He told himself it was for the best. *The night was cold.*

The memory faded and suddenly he was back in the clearing. Foreign emotions hitched in his throat as he struggled to recapture the calm facade he'd lost sometime between Arthur's speech and the shards of memory that were still pushing – stretching and expanding just underneath his skin, a constant barrage that was suffocating him from the inside out.

It was only in the sudden absence of words that he realized he was breathing hard. Everything was silent. The others were staring, *watching* – like vultures circling over wounded prey. His chest heaved, almost panting as the tightness of his collar and expertly tied Winsor suddenly became stifling.

He needed to leave.

Chapter 8

Once his mind had been made up, he didn't waste any time. As the others talked, the conversation a base thrum in the background, he bent down and deftly collected the small bundle already wrapped in butcher's paper that he'd set off to the side. His fingers ghosted across the creases in the paper with a practiced air – ensuring there would be no leakage on the journey home.

It was a ritual that signaled the end of a successful hunt, a time for reflection and precision. Only this time, he was denied that clarity, that *pleasure*. He would have to return later, before the authorities, and ensure he'd left nothing behind. He would be forced to view his masterpiece *after* the blood had dried, like an after-hours visitor to the Louvre, breathless yet impotent - the excitement having already worn thin.

Pity.

He transferred Ronald Jefferson's effects into a similar package. The others shifted, rustling about in the long grass, but he didn't look up, not even when the sound of Bors' laughter rippled through the clearing in front of him. Instead, he forced himself to focus, folding the thick brown paper into a make-shift envelope. He placed the man's clothing, wallet and keys inside as the stiff paper crinkled loudly in the close space.

Minutes ticked by, each one uncharacteristically hastening his hand. *He couldn't stay here.*

The low hum of conversation slowed when he finally straightened, packages in hand, turning questioning and uncertain before halting completely. He looked around the half circle, taking in the expressions of Gawain, Dagonet, Lancelot, Bors and Arthur before he blinked. Once again he was struck by the thought that even *that* was wrong, the circle was not yet complete.

He mentally shook himself, squashing his uncharacteristic uncertainty under a balm of forced calm. They would not be the cause of his discomfort. He would deal with this at another time and they would be punished accordingly. They'd seen more than anyone alive ever had – more of *him* and that had to be remedied. But first, he had to extricate himself. *He couldn't stay here.*

"Where are you going?" Arthur asked, stepping forward, moving until he was not quite invading his personal space, but certainly threatening it. Again he held his ground, refusing to be intimidated or refusing to let it show. For once, he was content not to examine that particular entanglement any further. He had a feeling he would not like what he found if he did.

There was no civil way to extricate himself from the situation, no excuse he could put forth that they would swallow. But the need to leave was almost overpowering. The air was thick, close and, like Mr. Jefferson only a few hours before, he felt strangely trapped. He was so unused to the sensation that it ruffled him. It made him feel unclean, off balanced, *banal.*

It made him feel like prey. And he was *not* prey.

His gaze roved around the half circle, flicking from one man to the other as he noted the way they'd flanked around their leader, seamlessly following his unspoken cues as they closed the gaps, hemming in him. They worked together like a well-oiled machine as his fingers tightened infinitesimally around the packages in his grip.

The muscles in his cheek twitched, irritation momentarily flashing across his expression when he realized they stood between him and the most the direct route to his car. The intent was clear. He was not going anywhere. He would have to make it through the five of them if he wanted his freedom. The tactic was careful, strategic; in fact, he would have deemed it impressive if their circumstances were reversed. He would have done the same in their place and thus the irony was certainly not lost on him.

The moment lengthened and trapped within it, he found himself restless. Unconsciously taking in each man, from body language to physical ability, he filed everything away. Every twitch, wince and dominant foot, creating a measure in his mind despite the fact that something deep and closeted in the back of his mind, told him that he already knew. The same voice that whispered darkly, weighing every strength and cataloging every weakness, which told him that one on one, he would likely emerge victorious.

The packages in his grip crinkled, the sound strangely loud in the sudden quiet. An empty smile spread across his face, flirting with the corners of his lips like a silent growl.

"As refreshing a divergence as this has been, I really must be going," he began, voice neat, precise as he watch the expression on the man's face flicker. He reveled in it.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," he continued, taking a careful step forward, the expensive Italian leather of his shoes sinking rather regrettably into the marshy grass, "I have pressing business elsewhere."

"May I ask why you're leaving?" Arthur inquired, tone surprisingly level considering he was now back stepping to keep them even. He continued moving forward - pressing his advantage.

"I am afraid you have simply ceased to interest me," he hummed, his voice a base purr as something flashed, cornered and angry in the back of the man's eyes.

It was a lie and they both knew it.

But he almost took a step back when the man called him out on it. *Almost*. Admittedly, he hadn't expected the man to so…*bluntly* point it out.

So much for that infamous Arthurian chivalry.

"No. You're running," Arthur snapped, raising his voice for the first time since they'd materialized in the clearing, tone cracking through the midnight gloom as he fixed him with a steely glare, "I never took you for a coward Tristan."

And for some reason, just like that, that one seemingly insignificant sentence, *burned* him. It flamed right through the unaffected facade he'd managed to forge through the ashes of the

one they'd already dismantled and burned him to the core.

"You're leaving because what I'm saying is hitting too close to the chest, am I right? Too close to things you rarely give voice - rarely let yourself even *think* about because deep down, the implications scare you," Arthur hissed, his voice rising another octave as the space that remained between them dissolved, so close now that he could, if he so desired, have reached out and touched him.

The phantom flutter of wings feathered across his cheek, so close he could almost *feel* the flights as they gentled across his skin. The air suddenly heady with the clean scent of freshly preened plumage and pulverized evergreen. He forced himself to breathe, startling when the screech of a falcon echoed in the air above his head, so loud, so *real* that he actually turned to look, neck craning upwards into the mist.

But of course, there was nothing there.

"Let me pass," he repeated, unable to keep the sharpness from his voice as the fingers of his free hand tensed on reflex. Even he had to admit that his tone was unusually sharp, *baser*, coming out as something that *could* have been construed as a warning, but in truth was far too feral.

"And if I don't?" Arthur returned, his gaze steely, yet disturbingly confident all at the same time as the man held his gaze.

The hairs on the back of his neck rose, prickling across the severe line of his collar as an irritated flush stole down the arc of his throat, looking heated against the deep red and blue stripes, his grey suit only serving to highlight his predicament as he ignored the reaction and made to speak.

"…Then I will make you."

Chapter 9

If he'd been expecting the man to back down, to pause and rethink his strategy, he would have been disappointed. On the contrary, the man seemed to have expected it, *counted* on it even.

He stalled, his expression guarded as the realization washed over him. The man had *known* it would come to this, to blows and petty words. Yet he'd still gone through the motions, attempting to sway him before the long line of dominoes toppled and left them here, exactly where he'd known they'd end up all along.

His teeth ground together. He felt compromised, *at siege*. Once again, Arthur had managed to make him feel as though he was consistently one step behind, flying blind in his own territory, in his own *element* as the man simply nodded. Like his threat had been a question that only he could answer.

He let the moment drag, ignoring the others as they gave them space, their body language changed, shifted, as he watched the man shrug out of his jacket. He didn't even spare so much as a glance at the expensive, Italian threads as he tossed it aside, the gesture careless – *disrespectful.*

His lip curled.

But Arthur only smiled, unbuttoning his cuffs and rolling up his sleeves like he was preparing for some crass, lower city bar brawl - inviting him to do the same.

He sniffed, letting the sound carry. But Arthur just raised a brow, his expression surprisingly open as they watched each other from across the close distance. *Apparently some things needed to be sorted out the old fashioned way.*

His vision flickered, the scenery around him changed - momentary, yet stark. His body and brain were being pulled in two opposing directions as a gust of wind rippled through his hair. The long strands caressed his face as he tipped his head back and laughed. The ends of his braids kissed his high cheek bones as his sword whistled through the air, each stroke smooth and deliberate as the scent of freshly wrought iron rose. He internalized every sensation until every blow, every *movement* became akin to a dance. *He was the master here, the maestro and the battlefield was his stage.*

He swallowed, forcing himself to focus as the man's posture stiffened. The air was still.

If he were anyone else he might have been incredulous when the man had rolled up his cuffs, squaring his shoulders like a big cat preparing to pounce. But he wasn't, so when the man darted forward, he was ready.

He didn't drop the packages until the last second, letting them slip through his fingers the same instant the man moved. The moment the man struck was not outwardly surprising.

Through the virtue of his own experience he'd actually seen it coming. It was all there, rippling like foreplay for the senses, naked and stripped bare for him to enjoy.

For him, it was simply a matter of action and reaction, observation and application. The first strike began in the man's shoulders, cording down his torso before rippling through his center as his opponent set his hips and let gravity do the rest.

He didn't move, letting him come within *inches* of him, the man's large fist curled and aimed for his torso. The blow would have been bruising and vicious, if it had landed. It was a test, a tactic meant to elicit a response, both emotional and physical, but not wound. *Not yet.*

He felt the breeze, but didn't flinch.

The man's lips hitched upwards, *patronizing*. Like an elder sibling suffused with pride as the younger finally managed to accomplish something petty, something like their first steps or the pronunciation of a particularly difficult word. He bit down on an irritated snarl, teeth sharp against the inside of his cheek as he forced himself not to react.

It worked, *barely.*

The next swing was glancing, insultingly obvious as the man tensed his knees before the blow connected. But he deflected it with the flat of his palm, content to let the man exert himself as he studied his prey.

He ducked the man's fist, stepping backwards once, twice and then again before he took his first swipe. He parried the blow with his free hand, turning it back into the man's chest as he pushed him away, taking pleasure in the way Arthur stumbled, forcing the others back up to avoid a collision.

His thumb traced a line down the blunt edge of the scalpel, watching and learning as Arthur righted himself, studying the man's movements as they circled one another. Only his body already knew them by heart. He could tell before the man moved which blow would land and which would not, what position he'd take or angle he'd strike from. *Somehow he just knew.*

It was instinctive, *ingrained.*

He couldn't explain how he knew; only that he did. Only that he was aware on some level that Arthur had *always* favored his left, that he had good balance and excellent follow through, that his style of fighting was aggressive but careful - meaning that the man was less prone to losing himself in the moment than he was to planning the close. He was a strategic fighter, less about brute force and more about logic, *a worthy opponent.*

The taste of ale and weak red wine flooded across his tongue as he raised his glass, a toast in unison with his brothers as they honored the fallen. Images whipped through his mind's eye. The memory shifted and suddenly there was horseflesh quivering between his thighs, he was astride a stallion, white and dappled. His hands, crooked from old breaks and calloused with labor were curled around the bridle as he rode; only vaguely listening to Gawain and Bors as they chattered amicably beside him, discussing what they would do when they were discharged.

Another memory followed, then another, and another. Until suddenly the sensation of a bow string, taut and humming with tension, vibrated against the curve of his chin, the flights scoring across his fingertips as he aimed – releasing the arrow into the mist a second later as the sound of men dying rose up around him. He bared his teeth when an agonized cry pierced through the din, shrouded in the trees on the edge of the clearing – all the indication he needed that his arrow had found its mark.

There were images of places he'd never been superimposed within the marshy clearing – a reeling mess of conflicting landscapes and tattered wisps of people that faded in and out of existence like mayflies on a warm summer day.

He had to admit that a part of him, however small, longed to immerse himself in it. To soak in every nuance, every impression and know it intimately. Because just as desperately as he wanted to remove himself from it, he also wanted to own it – he wanted to dig down to the very heart of it and carve his initials so deep that he would never doubt himself ever again. He wanted to tease it apart, shredding, ripping and tearing until-

He nearly growled, distracted as the images, the *memories* continued to overwhelm him, playing out in his mind's eye as Arthur pressed his advantage – using his sudden distraction to dart forward, leg kicking out. The man's sudden closeness caused him to lash out, revealing his full hand long before he'd intended as something, deep in his hind brain, *snarled.*

The scalpel scored a line right through the man's expensive Italian silk tie, severing it only a few millimeters from the knot, a hair's breath from breaking skin. …*An unmistakable warning of his own.*

The action came out feral, *angry* as his chest heaved, heavy and suffocating against the thick fabric of his suit jacket. The man's eyes widened a fraction as his hand darted up to his throat on reflex.

The ruined tie fluttered to the ground between them. Neat, yet free.

But Arthur just smiled.

"I have to admit, I've sorely missed our sparring sessions, Tristan."

Chapter 10

The adrenaline delivered a sweet jolt to his system when the man moved again, clearly recovered from his near miss. Arthur struck; left, right, then left again, a vicious uppercut, followed by a right-legged kick which were all deflected in quick succession. He returned them, raining down a series of blows, some which landed and some that did not. His scalpel hissed through the air as the man ducked backwards, *defensive*, his shoes sinking deep into the marshy soil.

Only the man seemed to know what he was about to do before he did it. Every move was a dance, choreographed, yet wild. A composition of his own making, a masterpiece in its own right, and yet the man matched him, every blow, every snap of the wrist and kick had somehow already been anticipated.

He whirled in place, pivoting on his heel as the man pressed forward, and suddenly the scalpel was a sword, whistling through the air inches from Arthur's jugular. Only it wasn't Arthur anymore, it was a man, a *woad*, half naked and yelling. The enemy was painted blue, hair streaming and wild as the wildling raised his battle axe and-

Static hissed on the edges of his vision, *threatening*.

He stumbled backwards as Arthur caught him unawares, head snapping back as the man dealt him a brutal punch that hit him square in the chin - following through with a glancing blow to the temple as the man managed to do a complete circuit around him, only retreating when he lashed out at the last moment. The scalpel scored a beaded line of crimson across the man's dominant arm before they fell back, collecting themselves.

Around and around the widening gyre…

Blood streamed from his nose, trickling down across his lips as he raised his hand, trying to stem the worst of the flow. He caught Arthur's gaze from across the circle, his eyes a dark hint as he fixed the man with a vicious glare, making sure he had Arthur's attention as he brought his hand up to his mouth, licking the blood from his fingers as the man watched.

Arthur's lips twitched, but whether disgusted or impressed, he didn't know.

"You don't just know what we say is true, you *want* it to be true. *That* is why you are running, because deep in your heart of hearts you have never wanted anything so bad, *so desperately*," Arthur began, confusing him as he tried to keep the man in his sights.

He swallowed an unsteady mouthful of blood before he lurched forward, scalpel slicing through the air millimeters from where the man's side had been only a few seconds before.

"Look at you!" Arthur thrummed, circling him now. "You can't even *breathe*. It's *choking* you!"

And he *was choking*. Physically, mentally, spiritually, in every way that mattered. He was being torn apart, dust and gravity convalescing until suddenly there was no air left to breathe. He didn't remember how to-

The man's next move caught him square in the stomach, right in the softness of the belly as he grunted and doubled over, more in surprise than in pain as he absorbed the blow. His skin was buzzing, blood adrenaline-soaked, dulling the pain from the man's blow until even that was superficial, unimportant.

"Reclaim your name, your *birthright!*"

The man was still talking. Dignified detachment fled in the place of rage. The emotion seared, rippling across his vision as he stumbled forward, scalpel heavy in his hands as he lashed out. His head was pounding, skin fever hot, he felt wrong, unkempt-

He snarled with impatience and kicked out, his hair falling over his eyes as he forgot the scalpel and landed a blow square between the man's shoulders, dead on the knob of his spine. It should have brought the man to his knees, but Arthur pivoted in mid-fall, kicking him in the side as the damp earth cushioned his fall.

He recovered before Arthur had a chance to right himself, but only just. His breathing was ragged, control fraying and yet, he paused. He should have pressed his advantage, he should have attacked, ended it, but he didn't. For the first time in his life, he *couldn't*.

The hand curled around the scalpel slackened.

Chapter 11

In the corner of his mind, something *writhed*, niggling and troublesome as a small but growingly virulent voice urged him to *stop*. To stop, listen and analyze, much like he would if he was seeing one of his patients. There was something he was missing, something elusive and long ignored.

...Something that didn't fit.

He was well versed in his own pathology but this, *these lapses*, weren't part of it. They didn't connect. They were uncontrolled, indelicate, yet telling. Each thought hinted at something more, something bigger, something that had been looming in the far reaches of his mind ever since he'd been able to separate his thoughts from that of others, from the opinions of his parents, his teachers, his peers and so on.

A sudden headache throbbed between his temples, off-beat and grating as his jaw ached. He forced himself to ignore it. His mind felt cluttered, ill-used. He wasn't used to this, this *feeling*, this uncertainty. Part of him wanted to lash out and another wanted to yield. His teeth sunk deep into his lower lip, desperate for the clarity that pain so often brought. He didn't stop until he tasted red.

The voice whispered again, telling him to slow down and connect the past with the present, memory with reality. To *let* it happen. He'd seen it after all, *lived* it. The images were too intimate, too detailed, too *grounded* to be hallucinations. He had no prior history of such behavior, nothing that could have triggered such an extreme break from reality. It didn't make sense. Perhaps Arthur was telling the-

No.

It was too much, *too much to believe*. And even if he did, what was the purpose? And by what power? Death was the only finality he'd ever subscribed to and now even that was uncertain. A part of him, sadistic and cruel, only laughed, calling him out as a hypocrite, and rightly so. There were people in the world that scarcely believed men like him even existed - or didn't want to believe.

Either way they were one and the same.

He realized he'd lost his advantage when the man rose to his feet, blood trickling fast from the curl of his bicep, painting the fabric of his shirt with broad streaks of crimson as Arthur pulled himself upright. The others, Lancelot and Gawain, shifted, about to move forward, but Arthur's hand arrowed out, stopping them before they'd even completed the motion. *The man didn't even have to look.*

Everything about his opponent screamed weakness – *wounded*. The lingering portions of logic still left to him screeched for him to press his advantage, to end it while the man was still off balance, still *recovering*. His lips pulled back in a grimace, a rictus of a smile as he imagined what the man would look out with his insides draped across his shoulders.

He was about to move, his muscles bunching and releasing as he flowed forward, rolling on his heels, scalpel slicing through the air as-

He blinked, shaking his hair out of his eyes and suddenly he was galloping across a wide, grassy plain. His horse exhaled a heady plume of white as they left the trees and the deep forest behind, racing through the long grass, fanning out in formation until they were a magnificent 'v' charging across the green. Arthur was at their head, Lancelot and himself on either side. The moment was glorious and macabre all at once as he yelled for the sheer joy of it. The air was alive with the sound of his brothers, whooping and singing as they rode into battle; a Roman caravan was under siege, *the bishop's caravan.*

He retched, dizzy, hands on his knees as pain lanced behind his eyes. It was almost as if his very brain were somehow trying to expel him. Mixing up fantasy and memory until foreign landscapes became familiar and strangers became family.

It occurred to him, somewhere between Arthur's neat upswing and his quick block that this could have been the man's intention all along, to distract him with fantasy and wishful thinking in an effort to take him off guard. It was artistically cruel, in a twisted sort of way, a masterpiece in its own right.

But for what purpose? Why would he-

A sudden breeze filtered through the clearing, skin prickling as another memory bubbled to the surface. It was a sense memory, intense, yet subtle. The wind rippled through his long hair as he faced the horizon, bloody and free, breathing in the scent of wild heather and the eternal dampness of the fertile Briton earth as he hobbled his horse and slipped from the saddle. His fingers brushed across the tips of the tall purple flowers, crushing them as he went, releasing the scent into the air until all he could smell, all he could *taste* was that of lavender and wild heather.

He blocked the man's next hit easily. But for reasons beyond him, he stumbled. A high pitched ringing pierced through his ears. His teeth were bared in a feral grimace as he slammed back against a tree, struggling to regain his balance. The bark was rough against the delicate wool of his suit, his ribs *throbbing.*

The scalpel slipped from his fingers as the world tilted on its axis and seamlessly the men around him shifted. The picture warped, no, *reality* warped, and suddenly the others were staring back at him, clad in armor and bloody smiles.

The blade had sunk point first into the loamy soil between them, glinting and metallic amidst a sea of green and earthy browns. Another voice, different, darker, chided him for his carelessness. And privately, he agreed.

It was *sloppy…inexcusable.*

He grunted, wheezing as a lungful of air exploded from his throat as the man caught him squarely in the solar plexus. He dropped on all fours, using it. He sucked in a ragged breath and then another as his chest throbbed. The man moved forward, dancing in range cautiously, like he was truly concerned that he'd injured him. But that was all he needed. He swept his

arms around, grounding himself with his knees, hamstringing him, sending him collapsing to the ground in an exhale of old sweat and over starched fabric, a hallmark of a second class dry cleaners, and blood slicked earth.

He grinned through a mask of bloody teeth, forgetting himself.

He didn't know how he felt about it when Arthur did the same.

Chapter 12

"Your name is Tristan, plains born. You are a Sarmatian by birth and blood, a *knight*, a *warrior*," Arthur rasped, wiping his hand across his mouth like an afterthought, smearing his chin with red as they circled one another.

War paint.

He tried to ignore the words, focusing instead on the man's movements. His hands were curled into fists, his left hand up, protecting his face like a boxer in the ring, the main competitor of a prize fight. The man's shoulders were straight, *settled*, the scalpel forgotten in the soft earth somewhere between them.

"You were my best scout, my best strategist. You saved my life a hundred times over. We grew up together, *killed* together; I owe you my life, brother," Arthur insisted, lurching forward to grip him by the shoulders the same moment he tried to lash out, holding him fast in a tense arm lock that he returned. His fingers sunk deep into the man's flesh as they stared at each other, faces just millimeters apart as *something*, deep-seated and visceral, scored across his mind's eye.

And suddenly he was back there, back in a moment where he was scrabbling against the man in the muck. He felt every sensation like it was his own, the way his bare feet sunk deep into the slick, the warmth of the sun on his naked back, the taste of grit in his mouth as they sparred, even the dull throb of recent hits pulsed just underneath his skin as he struggled to catch his breath.

But despite the similarities, what was happening in the memory was different from what was happening in real-time. This was infantile, adolescent, *training*. This was two boys, leggy and unbalanced, tussling in the mud on the training yard as the swords they'd been using, wooden and heavy, were tossed aside in favor of fists and bare skin.

They were being egged on by a ring of spectators, mostly gangly boys sporting that thin, pinched look that comes part and parcel with that first real growth spurt, a hallmark of a child's impending manhood.

It was a proving ground, a contest. And both of them were evenly matched.

The sound of his breathing, breathless and harried, was loud in the close space.

His vision crossed, almost losing himself in the emotional backwash until the sensation of Arthur's fingers breaking skin finally registered. The pain was grounding. *Real.* Enough to bring him catapulting back to the present as every muscle in his body seemed to bristle.

"I don't know you," he hissed, rage coursing through him as a trickle of fear lit up his senses like fire nearing an unlit fuse. His accent thickened in his distraction as he tried to center himself, shoring himself up even as the foundations upon which he'd built his innermost shields *quivered*. The emotion was unfamiliar and dank as he forced himself to shake it off,

suddenly feeling more like prey than ever before as he hissed in a breath, shoring up his upper body as he tried to put some distance between them, but failed.

The man held fast.

But he'd had enough.

He whirled in place, taking their arms above their heads, spinning around to jab the man's spine in a last ditch effort that had never failed him. Only somehow the man knew, he knew before he'd even completed the motion, and caught him in mid-turn, absorbing his energy and using it against him as he flipped him over his shoulder. They grunted, almost in unison, as they hit the dirt, sliding across the ground as a shower of pebbles and grit scored across his cheek.

He turned over, one hand fisting into the long grass, welcoming the leverage as Arthur caught his gaze from behind the untidy sheath of his hair. The man was still flat on his back, shirt dirt-smeared and ripped, but when he caught his stare, split lower lip and all, the man's smile was almost *fond.*

"Tristan, *really*, I got wise to that move before we graduated to *long bows.*"

He just panted, wordless.

Chapter 13

The image of Saxons, spreading like locusts across the English moors, played out behind his tightly closed lids. His mount quivered underneath him, pawing at the frost as they watched rivers of men stream through the valley below, setting fire to a small farming village directly in their path. They were here, just like the Romans had promised. They had run out of time. *They were coming.*

Somewhere in the distance, a woman screamed.

Arthur was talking again, his split lips oozing confusion, *leaking red*. But whatever the man was saying, he didn't let him finish. His head jerked forward, catching Arthur square in the forehead before either of them had even registered that he'd moved, the clearing echoing with the sickening crunch of bone meeting bone as he stumbled backwards, steadying himself against the trunk of an ancient maple as the dull thrum of pain spread behind his eyes.

Victory always comes at a price, otherwise it would be called a compromise.

The force of the blow sent Arthur crumpling backward, sprawling on the ground in an undignified tangle of bloody fabric and sweat slicked skin. But once again the man used it, taking the loss in stride, because instead of retaliating, instead of scrambling to his feet and using any of the dozen moves available to him, he propped himself up on his elbows and looked up at him, gaze piercing and dark.

"Look into my eyes and tell me if I am lying."

He swallowed, mouth flooded with saliva and the dry tang of his own blood, his tongue thick and unyielding as he choked on the beginnings of a reply. But before he could get it out, static took him again.

They were with one of the grand masters, learning their letters when the call came. The latest batch of new recruits had been spotted by the guards on the battlements, only two miles from the westernmost gate. They were two months overdue. They didn't even wait for their teacher to dismiss them, they were out the door and gone before the old man had fully recovered from the original interruption.

They chased each other up the hill, whooping with excitement, following the progress of the ragged Roman standard, bobbing and weaving as the group picked their way along the narrow, winding path. The settlement was in an uproar, a churning mess of soldiers and administrators as people simply dropped what they were doing and rushed to meet them.

It was a special occasion, unique. Not just because of their lateness, but because this would be the last batch of Sarmatian recruits that would serve under Arthur when they came of age.

But when the group finally breasted the hill, what they saw gave even their boyish excitement pause. The group was small, *too small*. It was a convoy of empty horses and a few, tiny, fur-wrapped figures perched awkwardly on ill-fitting mounts. They were alive, but barely, staring

dully at the trail ahead, their eyes empty and disinterested in spite the growing noise of the settlement that was filtering into the air around them.

They looked as though they'd seen the deepest reaches of hell yet had been allowed to pass straight through - too pitiful, too *broken* for even the gods to make sport out of them.

They waited on the sidelines of the trail, watching as the pitiful convoy finally crested the last rise, making their way towards them. The wagon bringing up the rear creaked, its hold a darkened mess of bare limbs and crudely wrapped bodies.

It hadn't been a journey; it had been a death march.

Gawain's breathing hitched at the sight, the cadence unsteady and angry at his back. Dagonet and Bors mirrored him, their faces impassive, but body language speaking volumes. Arthur was the only one who had stepped forward, his fists clenched at his sides, unmoving. The leader in him likely resigning himself to the fact that he'd failed before he'd even started. It was everything he feared.

Something had happened; a sickness, a fever, perhaps? Had they been caught in that unseasonable cold that had wracked the whole of Britain throughout the early spring? Either way, it didn't matter now. They were here, *safe.*

And one of the bundles, a boy, thin and colt-like with a mess of dark brown ringlets and haunted, fever-bright eyes seemed to echo that sentiment. Because as his horse passed, the boy lost his battle with consciousness. His eyes rolling back in his head like a man possessed, his hand slackening on the bridle as he slipped off the saddle in a dead faint.

He caught the boy before he fell, not even thinking the action through as he pressed the thin little creature to his chest. Cradling his head as the fur wrappings fell away and revealed the form of a boy, maybe five or six years younger than himself, half-starved and riddled with pox. But that wasn't the worst of it, his skin was *mottled*, a filthy canvas of healing bruises and unidentifiable smears.

He'd been brutalized. Beaten.

It wasn't until later – when the Lieutenant who had been charged with the boys' safety after his commander fell to the fever that had taken all but three of the boys had been thrown in the stockades that he learned the colt's name.

Galahad.

His hand came up, as if to draw back the veil that had fallen over his vision. He shook his head, pulse thundering in his ears. He lurched backwards, suddenly assaulted by a thousand conflicting sensations – barely afloat. His palms pressed against his temples, desperate to stop the whirl of images as he struggled against a surge of nausea.

Some logical portion of his brain attempted to work through it. *Cognitive dissonance*, it reasoned. The discomfort experienced when simultaneously holding two or more conflicting ideas. But then again, there shouldn't be conflict at all. *He knew who he was. He knew-*

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Don't fight it Tristan..."

It was an innocuous enough statement, but for some reason, the final threads of his control simply shattered. He snapped, *broke* – like a destructive patient lost in the grips of a manic episode, he threw himself at him. A bitten off roar slipped from his lips as he took the man down into the swampy grass in a messy jumble of long limbs and bunching muscle.

He lost himself then, he forgot who he was and where, forgot that he was *better* than this, *a better predator*, far above tussling in the mud like a couple of delinquents in a school yard. Kicking, punching, scratching, *clawing*.

Arthur managed to roll them, trapping him underneath him for a long moment, only to howl in pain and yank himself away a few moments later when he sunk his teeth deep into the meat of the man's shoulder. And the taste of the man's blood, metallic and bold, as it trickled across his tongue, only *heightened* the moment.

He caught the man before he could pull away, gripping his head in his hands and yanking him sideways, slamming him into a tree as the man reeled back, dazed. He tackled Arthur to the ground, the effort pulling a savage sound from deep in his throat as his nails scored down the man's forearms.

He bared his teeth, hissing into the twilight as he threw himself at him. Pinning him underneath as he rained blows down across the man's face, his torso, neck, clavicle, *anywhere he could reach*, eviscerating his thin defenses as Arthur put his hands up, vainly trying to protect his face.

He gave into the rage, the resentment, the mania, vehemence and fury that had *always* been there - lingering skin deep, *waiting*. He used everything he didn't know he had left as his fists came back bloody.

He inhaled, shaky yet invigorated. The air above his head was flooded with unlit napalm, thick, rich and terrible with promise. And he wanted to be the one to set it on fire. He wanted to watch as everything shriveled and burned. He wanted-

It was freeing, in a crass, hedonistic sort of way. The type of thing he'd be more likely to pick apart later, preferably in front of a warm fire, with a decanter of mulled wine and a generous selection of sliced brie, than to give it any real thought in the heat of the moment. He would examine this new facet of himself from the inside out, content to tease out the details at his leisure.

Arthur's knee jerked up, trying to catch him in the gut, the groin, *anywhere*, but he bore down, capturing it under the press of his calves until their limbs were tangled together, a

twisted parody of a lovers embrace. One of the man's arms curled around his wrist, his grip so tight he swore he could hear the bones grinding together. But he barely noticed, his free fist slammed, too unpredictable to be caged, into the man's side. Arthur grunted, the air exploding out of his lungs as he elbowed the man in the gut for good measure.

If he could have seen himself, he probably would have been appalled. His crisp, charcoal-grey suit was now rumpled and dirty, ripped along the shoulders, likely beyond repair, when he'd thrown himself at Arthur in a rage. Anger and uncertainty boiled up inside him in a way it hadn't since Mischa, since-

Finesse and grace were lost in translation as they rolled around in the long grass, fighting for the upper hand as the others moved around them – flickering like specters on the edge of his vision as they circled. It wasn't until he'd managed to stun his opponent, half-throttling him as Arthur thrashed, each action more desperate than the last as the taller man struggled to breathe, that Bors broke the silence.

"That's it, Tristan! Give it to him! He's had this comin' for *decades!* Show him what you can do, ya' slippery little bastard!" the burly man roared, voice strangely distant as the others made encouraging sounds, almost as if this were nothing more than child's play.

Red flooded across his vision, teeth sinking into his lower lip as the man managed to fling him off, sending him tumbling backwards, ribs throbbing, as he scrabbled in the dirt. He rolled himself out of the way just in time as Arthur threw himself at him. It was pure luck that he managed to catch the man in mid-lunge, rolling them into a thicket of low-lying brush as the man's breathing, staggered and harsh, shivered across his nape.

He half expected Arthur's men to help him, to gang up on him now that he'd managed to overpower their leader, but they didn't. If this was an attack, it was not a physical one. And really, perhaps that should have been his *first* clue.

Reality devolved, shattering into individual prisms of color – of *feeling*.

He forgot about the piece of Ronald Jefferson currently congealing in its brown paper prison somewhere behind them, momentarily lost in the marshy grass. He forgot that he had two clients scheduled for early the next morning, an emotionally overwrought mother of six on the verge of a mental break and an emotionally-constipated, socially neurotic business executive with a lazy eye and a tendency to compensate for his perceived inadequacies with disproportional bluster and threats of violence.

He forgot his name, his history, himself. Realizing far too late that this was by *design*, his mind had already started to rewrite itself. With fantasy and memory intertwining, tangling together in startling free form as the phantasmagorical landscapes that were still flashing across his mind's eye, images of places, people, *things* - became achingly familiar.

If he were anyone else, he might have been lost, in the throes of some emotional or mental schism, a psychological break. But he wasn't. He *knew* he was sane, *he knew*, and yet-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The next chapter will be wrapping up this particular section of this fic, so chapter 16, the chapter after next will mark the beginning of a part of the story where I will be loosely following the events of the "Hannibal" TV show – up to, at least episode nine.

Chapter 15

The snow was cold on his cheeks as he spurred his horse down the dirt road, narrowing the gap between the wilds and the villa as he passed a staggered army of men, women and children all hurriedly loading a long line of carriages. They didn't meet his eyes as he rode past, their heads down, cowed yet respectful as he caught sight of Arthur's cloak, a singular point of color in a sea of muddy brown and dug his heels into his mount's side.

They were running out of time.

"They have flanked us to the east," he announced, drawing the man away from the others in way of greeting, ensuring they would not be overheard. "They're coming from the south, trying to cut off our escape. They'll be here by nightfall."

"How many?" Arthur asked, his voice a stringent, deadly calm as a gust of wind rippled across his helm, ruffling his thick red cloak as a fine sheath of snow melted into his curls.

"An entire army," he related, chest tightening on reflex as he remembered cresting the ridge at the mouth of the valley, some miles above, crawling on his belly through the sharp rocks and undergrowth just as the Saxon army had crested the ridge. He was not easily awed, and certainly not easily intimidated, but in terms of sheer numbers, it had been enough to give even *him* pause.

"And the only way out is to the south?" the man inquired, the cogs and wheels visibly turning behind his eyes as he considered their options.

But he just shook his head. "East, there is a trail heading east, across the mountains. It means we will have to cross behind Saxon lines, but that's the one we should take," he affirmed.

A sound from behind them drew their attention back to the line of carriages. It was only then that he realized that Arthur meant to leave with them. Irritation rose up in the back of his throat. Men, women, children, even the elderly, they'd never make it over the mountain pass. They had one opportunity and a small window in which to do it - but it all banked on speed. They had to be quick enough to slip past the Saxon forces undetected and then race them back to Hadrian's Wall. The last thing they needed was *more* baggage.

"Arthur, who are all these people?"

"They're coming with us," the man responded, meeting his stare head on as the courtyard behind them *churned* with people.

He huffed out a laugh at that, reading the man's determination from the expression on his face, the sound was breathy but mirthless. He knew Arthur well enough to know when his mind was made up. He was as unmovable as stone, his morality a fixed point in time, steadfast and righteous, yet brash. Arthur fought with his heart and thought with his soul. It was a unique combination, very much unlike his own, but he respected it. *They were brothers after all.*

"They'll never make it."

The look they shared wasn't hostile, not quite, merely differing. They had long shared an understanding, even when they disagreed, a respect that went beyond that of petty differences and meaningless quarrels. At the end of the day, every man had to do what he felt was right.

But before Arthur could respond, and as if on cue, the sound of Saxon drums rose up in the distance. They echoed through the valley in vast rolling booms of sound, reverberating off of stone and soil - the opening strains of a far darker chorus.

They were coming.

But before he could fully grasp it, the moment dissolved, replaced by a wavering stream of unlikely colors and the dull roar of a thousand different voices rising up as one. He caught a glimpse of Arthur before the memories reeled him back. The man's face was an ancient canvas, craggy and hopeful.

He was just standing there, watching. *Why didn't he attack? He had the advantage, why didn't he-*

He stretched, leaning over the saddle to thread his fingers through his horse's mane, whispering softly in its ear as it huffed, twitching its tail contently, taking the opportunity to graze in the long grass. *Greedy beast.*

The argument with Galahad was foremost on his mind. The bishop's caravan was days away. And inevitably the man had pinned him with the same questions they were all asking themselves. *Now what?* Only in their case, his lover was not content with his answers.

He had no desire for a life outside of this one. Even if it meant forfeiting a return to the home he longed for. To this day that longing was akin to that of a *physical* ache – an old injury that rose up right from the very center of him. Call it the intuition of a child or a gut instinct, but somehow, the day the Romans had come for him, their rich golden standard rippling in the breeze, he'd known that he would never return. The grassy hills and open plains of his homeland existed now only in his memory. And that would be where they would stay.

He'd made his peace with that a long time ago.

He had no desire to move on – to grow old and fat and relive the glory of old victories through the bottom of his ale cup. He had no desire to settle down and sire a brood of sons and daughters, like Bors and the others. No, he found his peace, his *grace* in solitude. The battlefield was what fulfilled him, what *nourished* him. The only woman he'd ever courted was death and sooner or later she would come to claim him. It was an inevitability that he'd come to relish – death was a finality none of them could run from, and when a man accepted that, serenity often followed.

The world was changing, a new order was rising, Rome was in its death throes and if he knew one thing for certain, it was that men like him, like *them*, when the dust settled, wouldn't have a place in this new world. Like the warriors of legend, they too would fade.

Galahad would realize this before the end.

The memory faded, *splintering*, and suddenly he found himself back in the present.

His fists were dripping with red, fingers clenched tight and aching as he reared above him, wild and feral. He bared his teeth, snarling his defiance as Arthur's eyes never left his face, looking up at him through swollen lids and darkening bruises. He was just about to strike when the man spoke, all bloody teeth and wide-shot eyes.

"Tristan, I need you."

His fist faltered, tongue tasting his own blood as he stilled on top of him. He stalled.

He blinked, vision shot through with static as his surroundings shifted, taking him back to the moment where their forces met with the woads. There were archers in the trees. Arthur's sword was raised; glinting red in the half-light as the blade sliced through naked flesh, the man didn't see them. But he did.

He yanked his horse to the side, reining the creature in as it kicked out its rear legs, catching an approaching woad square in the torso. The man fell to the side with a cry, trampled underneath sharp hooves as his mount whinnied, the sickening crunch of snapping bones adding another layer to the chorus as the battle raged around them.

But he hardly noticed, his eyes were on the tree line, searching for the shooter. It wasn't until another arrow hissed out from the brush on the opposite side of the clearing, just missing Arthur's upper thigh, that he found his mark. His hand came back, yanking an arrow from the quiver strapped to his back, fingers gentling along the flights as he drew back, aiming.

The archer was over eager, like a gangly boy spilling his seed before his trembling fingers could even finish undoing his lover's blouse, he shot early. Like the rest of this rabble, he was undisciplined. The world narrowed in the seconds before he released, spiraling down until all there was, all there would ever be was that narrow patch of leafy green and the shadows that lurked behind it.

His arrow whistled through the air. But he was off and moving again before it'd even met its mark. *He had work to do.*

He blinked and the clearing came back into view. He was *surrounded*. Instinct ruled as his hand came back to grab his bow. But of course, there was nothing there and his hand came back empty. Only this time he wasn't aware of it. His eyes were on the tree line, caught in the veil between memory and reality. Something that had played out a thousand times before, like a reflection in a pond that never quite came clear.

He sucked in air in a way that made him wonder when he'd stopped breathing.

"What is he-" Gawain began, distant and questioning before trailing off as Arthur's hand came up. His split-knuckles pulled taut as he made a fist, a clear signal for silence.

"Quiet, it's happening…" Arthur ordered, his voice a base-line thrum as he met his stare, holding it as the fist that was still drawn up to his cheek, like a viper poised to strike, wavered.

The facade was crumbling.

He stumbled, pulling himself off the man in an awkward frenzy of movement. Because something was happening, like ripples dancing across the water, marring the serene nature of an inlet pond, something was spreading, *changing.*

The dissonance between the two lives was jarring, jarring but *right*. Like a song half-forgotten from his childhood that had suddenly come back to him, he was awash with memory - the past streaming back to him in living color.

The air felt irradiated, like he could suffocate in spite of the oxygen he knew was there. Because this was more than a metaphor, more than a dream, a nightmare, or a hallucination, this was *him*, then and now. Who he'd been, yet also who he was. They were one and the same. They'd always been. He just hadn't had the knowledge to perceive the difference.

The epiphany was rude, ill-timed and brash. But then again, he supposed that was the point.

Warmth suffused him, spreading down his skin like a blush as he staggered, reeling back against a tree as his hold on reality quivered. Everything swirled, battering against him in a raging maelstrom of emotion and memory, rich with images and peals of sound as he fought to keep his head above the swell.

The face underneath his skin screamed, howling and broken. He thrashed, clawing at himself, suffocating, *burning*. He needed an outlet. *It was too much, he couldn't-*

"Steady on, Tristan, *Christ*, breathe man!" Dagonet shouted. But he heard the man's voice only distantly, the words themselves unimportant as his arms swung forward, trying to keep them at a distance as he scrambled away. His knees sunk into the soft mud, one hand yanking at his tie, fingers shaking as the expensive silk glided across his palms. Ripping and tearing as the chill of the material sent a rash of gooseflesh coursing across his overheated skin - adding insult to injury.

He was choking. He needed to breathe; he needed to feel the air on his skin as the world *roared*. He nearly cursed as he pulled the damn thing free.
centering him. His fingers dug deep into the dirt, grounding himself there until they *ached*. There was blood trickling from his mouth, dribbling down his lips and chin unchallenged, painting his skin with sluggish rivulets of color as darkness tinged the edges of his vision.

Reality shifted, twisting and writhing and again he was back there. Dreaming of a home he could barely visualize. He remembered the thrill of the hunt, the *chase*, the roars of his brothers rising and falling around him as the echoing peel of iron rose up in the air like the beginning strains of some long forgotten song. He remembered the thrill that had coursed through him when blood-stained iron sliced into the pale ivory of naked bone. He remembered Bors' woman singing. Galahad in his arms, trembling with pleasure as the man's release spilled across his chest in a smear of dewy-white. He remembered watching his falcon

circling, taking flight from its place on his arm. He remembered soaring, living, fighting, then-

He fell to his knees, *reeling*, because suddenly he understood.

He had forgotten.

"…Arthur?" He croaked, the word was tremulous and half formed, colored with accents, both new and old, a mixture of past and present as he forced himself to look up. Their expressions were half hidden by shadows as the realization spread across their features like dawn breaking on the plains, blood-red and unforgettable.

His limbs trembled, mortifyingly weak. It made him feel like an old man struck with palsy, a newborn squalling, or an awkward adolescent caught in a fit of jumbled limbs and innocent confusion. His mind reached for a comparison but found there wasn't one. Or there were *too many*, honestly he couldn't tell anymore.

"Arthur…"

It came out sounding like a mantra, a prayer, something grounding and real even as Galahad's name rose unbidden to his lips. Uttering out into the quiet like a *plead*, like an expletive, a blessing and a curse. It was an emotion that had shades, *layers*, with the nearest approximation involving a lover scenting the nape of their partner's neck as they murmured contently underneath, unconsciously crowding back as the thrum of their heart slowly lulls you to sleep.

Arthur's hand firmed around his shoulder, strong and bold, just like always. His scent was acidic, yet calming, *familiar*. But he only had a second to internalize it, because a moment later, his brothers fell on him, *completing him*. Piling around him until the very air was rich with their scent, heralding a promise of a future that he hadn't even realized he'd been yearning for.

He was home.

And for the first time in almost three decades the tears were real.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In many ways he actually wasn't prepared to see Galahad's face staring up at him from the stack of files Jack had handed him before he'd departed. He'd left behind a trail of singed paper and mildly priced cologne as he'd walked the man out the door, promising to notify him with his conclusions the following morning.

It had been nearly ten years since that moment in the clearing, ten years since Ronald Jefferson's fuel pump had conveniently failed just ten minutes from the airport, ten years since Arthur and the others had found him. And in many ways, in the intervening decade, he'd thought of little else. Arthur and the others - save for Gawain and Dagonet – were abroad, searching for their last remaining brother. Meanwhile, he'd expanded his practice, furthering his already impressive reputation in the field of psychiatry and medical science in the hopes that he might come across the man that way.

A machination that had finally born fruit.

He rolled the elastic off the large manila folder, intent on learning more about his newest patient. He'd agreed to Jack's request without a second thought, he found it invigorating, in a reckless sort of way, that of all people it was the *FBI* who had come courting - the FBI that needed *his* expertise.

The irony was utterly delicious.

He'd already decided that it would be a most pleasant divergence. An opportunity to exercise his skills alongside the very people who were trying to catch him, the supposed best and brightest that America had to offer. But it wasn't until he set the elastic off to the side and opened the cover that he realized how kind fate had truly been.

His fingers threaded between the pages, lips parting almost obscenely as his throat hitched through a sudden exhale. The pages crinkled under his hands, crisp and unmarred as his jaw clenched, his spine a fused mess of tense muscles and quivering energy. He was barely conscious of the way the fingers of his free hand sunk into the plush leather of the armrest, too engrossed in the picture staring back at him to fully process it until a worrisome creak issued from the abused upholstery. He forced himself to calm, to *settle* as a thousand different emotions filtered through him like endorphins through the blood stream.

Galahad.

He was aware of him before Will Graham had even entered the room; the man's presence was subtle, but undeniable, almost as if his aura preceded him down the hall – reminiscent of the heavy clouds that roll in before a winter storm, oppressive, but purposeful. He forced himself not to react; his hands remained poised in his lap, nodding appropriately as Jack filled him in on the case.

The man didn't enter right away, instead he lingered on the threshold, neither in nor out of the door, clearly taking him in from behind, instinctively cautious of the new arrival. He wondered what the man could glean from him already, was he taking clues from his body language? His mode of dress? The way he *seemed* to take his cues from Jack, but in truth ruled the conversation as his careful insights and subtle questioning forced the man to be that much more open when it came to the details.

He was quite certain that the man missed nothing. A dangerous trait when it came to the sort of company he chose to keep. But despite the risks he planned to do exactly that. He didn't intend to let anything separate them again. *Not this time. Not when he was so close.*

When they were finally introduced, the man ducked his chin into his chest, eyes flickering across his face for a few breathless seconds before dropping down to somewhere around his navel - deferential but sullen. And when the boy finally shook his outstretched hand, part of him was smugly gratified to see Jack's surprised expression. Clearly there was an aversion to touch as well as eye contact, something Will seemed content to ignore when it came to *him* - perhaps even him alone. *Curious.*

The man was even more delectable than he remembered.

He watched Will pace around Jack's office, quietly observing as he took out a thermos of sweet tea and poured himself a cup. Noting the cathartic undertones as the man made a few, nervous circuits around the room before settling. It reminded him of a lone wolf spinning in place, turning circles in the long grass before it finally curled into itself, tucking its nose under its tail, soothing itself with its own scent before it dropped off to sleep.

The resemblance, if nothing else, was uncanny.

He had to admit that even for him, seeing the man like this was utterly bizarre. It was like the man he'd known as Galahad was wearing another's skin, living another man's life and molding his decisions and reactions based on the memories and experiences of that life. He spared a thought to wonder if this had been similar to the feelings of Arthur and the others when they had discovered him, or if it was simply because of their…*connection* that made the divide that much more apparent.

Perhaps the biggest difference between them was that this man *reeked* of fear. Fear of himself, fear of the world and the people around him, fear of his own potential and fear of other people's potential. Fear of failure, fear of success. Fear of what his mind might conjure when he closed his eyes at night, but more particularly, fear of what might still be there when he woke. Unlike Galahad, it was clear that fear is what drove Will Graham. And yet, the man was no coward.

The intellectual in him was piqued; of course, pure empathy was a rare gift and a curse in its own right. What a fascinating place Will's mind must be, a shattering prism of darkness and light.

It must be like trying to breathe in a wind tunnel.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The following portion of this fic will mostly follow the events of the TV show up to, at least, episode nine. As for characterization, I am aiming for Hannibal to still be Hannibal, and Will to still be Will – but for both to also be Tristan and Galahad, if that makes any sense. Consider them a melded palate of both characters. I am sticking as true to each character as possible, which in my opinion is remarkably easy considering I see Hannibal/Tristan as remarkably similar characters. Same with Will/Galahad. So, considered Hannibal and Will as the same as always, just with some extra background baggage. Also, I am diverging from cannon a bit as in this story Will does not have encephalitis – instead, his oncoming/ongoing mental break is actually a result of his past memories as Galahad which begin to surface more and more due to both Hannibal's presence and not so subtle attempts to bring Galahad back to him. This will be explained more in the coming chapters.

Chapter 17

He'd often wondered where Galahad had been the day Arthur had come for him. Had he felt it? The moment it'd all come together? That spark, that *epiphany*? Had he been close? Despite the folly of it, he'd always imagined it that way. In his mind's eye the man could have been only miles away, perhaps returning from a late night lecture or filing the necessary paper work from a freshly closed case – either way, the details, at least in this instance, didn't matter. It was the soul of the matter that interested him, the reaction, the *feeling*.

He considered the possibility, remote as it was, that in the same moment that he'd fallen to his knees, his coal-grey trousers sinking deep into the bloody-slick, that Will Graham might have suddenly found himself inexplicably restless. Gnawing on the inside of his cheek, canker-ridden and painfully dry, as a surge of emotion crested in his breast, both foreign and familiar as his brothers had descended on him, piling around him, warm and boisterous as their well-meant embraces reminded him of the true nature of brotherhood.

Had he smelt the smoke when they'd set fire to the clearing? They'd been forced to scorch his masterpiece and, much to his displeasure, what remained of Ronald Jefferson, a necessary evil considering the state of the clearing after their brawl. The air had been heavy with the scent of singed gasoline and evaporated crimson, sending smoke and half burned tinder sky-high. The forest canopy was peppered with embers as the wind lent its support, steadily erasing their presence as the wailing sirens of emergency services echoed through the growing roar, spurring them on as the shadows welcomed them home.

Had he felt it in his bones when the knights of Hadrian's Wall had ridden again? Had a part of their lost brother soared with them? Cried with them? Celebrated? Even in some small way? Had he woken from a dead sleep and found himself wandering? His bare feet sinking into the soft grass as he looked towards the horizon and *wondered*, finding himself unable to ease the sudden ache in his breast as the distant smell of burning pine wafted through the air, filtering amongst the backwash of a strong, westerly breeze.

Or worse, had the man felt nothing at all? Was Will Graham's denial that complete? Was the man's grip on reality so tenuous, so *fragile* that he hadn't even allowed himself the possibility? In reality, the options were endless, complex but undoubtedly satisfying. As if Will Graham was a particularly challenging puzzle that was his alone to decipher. Yet now that he had the man in his sights, the question became only that much more *torturous*.

But he tempered his thoughts; it would not do to overwhelm the man, especially now. He had to earn his trust first, his *respect*. Just like Galahad thousands of years before, Will Graham would need a specialized hand to realize his true potential.

He took a measured sip of tea, letting Will and Jack's conversation wash over him for a few moments before he rose, examining a selection of photos with a critical eye, masking his interest as he feigned absorption and let the moment breathe.

Will's eyes followed him.

He retook his seat, raising the cup to his lips before he paused, considering. "Not fond of eye contact, are you?" he asked, taking the opportunity the man had unknowingly given.

"Eyes are distracting," the man replied, his annoyed sigh shaky in only the slightest of ways. "See too much, you don't see enough – and it's hard to focus when you're thinking, um – oh, those whites are really white or he must have hepatitis, or *oh* is that a burst vein?" His tone was sardonic, but ironically, he met his eyes for the first time since they'd sat down.

His lips quirked upwards, but this time the smile was genuine. The younger man had a wry wit he found appealing.

"So, yeah, I try to avoid eyes whenever possible, Jack?" Will prompted, clearly impatient for them to continue. The man's tone was dismissive but lacking in follow through as he refused to meet his stare.

But he spoke before Jack could get any further than an initial response, using the opportunity to even the playing field as he straightened. He smoothed his grey blazer with a careful hand before he turned, not missing the way the movement caught the man's attention.

"I imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind. Your values and decency are present, yet shocked at your associations, appalled at your dreams. No thoughts in the void arena of your skull for the things you love," he observed.

The man's face was a clouded mosaic of shock, warmth and oddly, *yearning*, that existed in tandem the split second before suspicion and finally anger rushed to the forefront - trumpeting his righteous indignation as Will's gaze sharped.

"Whose profile are you working on?" he murmured, barely missing a beat as he turned to face Jack, body language affronted and vaguely betrayed.

"*Whose* profile is he working on!?"

"I'm sorry, Will. Observing is what we do, I can't shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off," he hummed, taking a deliberately exaggerated sip from his cup as Jack radiated quiet discomfort from across the desk. He masked it well, but he could tell nonetheless. The man didn't like his prized, china tea cup pressed, unless of course, it was *him* doing the pressing.

"Please don't psychoanalyze me. You won't like me when I'm psychoanalyzed," the man threatened, the heat behind the words more disgruntled pride and self-preservation than anything, but it was still enough to merit a cautionary word from Jack.

"Will-" the man began, lips a stern line across his face as he pinned Graham with what he could only assume was the man's equivalent of a soothing glare.

But Will had apparently had his fill of being prodded because he cut his superior off and rose. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go give a lecture…on *psychoanalyzing*," Will snarked before sweeping out of the office, graceless to a fault.

He found his impudence *invigorating.*

Jack shifted in his seat. "Maybe we shouldn't poke him like that doctor," he offered, fiddling idly with a pen. "Perhaps a less direct approach," the older man observed, clearly unused to being the one to offer opinions rather than being the one that was demanding them.

Normally he would agree. But dramatics aside, he'd planted the seed. He'd told him, in a roundabout sort of way, that he was not as alone as he might think. And if Will Graham needed anything, it was *that* hope.

"What he has is pure empathy," he replied, steepling his fingers as he leaned forward. "He can assume your point of view or mine and maybe some other points of view that scare him. It's an uncomfortable gift, Jack," he explained, uncertain of how much Alana had coached him in regards to Will's condition before the woman had referred him.

"Perception is a tool that is pointed on both ends."

He waited until he got a murmur of assent from the older man before he looked back towards the door Will had left from. The material of his tan sports coat pulled tight around the shoulders as he straightened, seeing a mirror image play out in his mind's eye as Will Graham and Galahad strode out of the room as one, two sides of the same coin, the same, yet not.

Something in his throat thickened. *Excitement, longing, arousal, it didn't matter; they were one and the same.*

"This cannibal you have him getting to know, I think I can help good Will see his face," he thrummed.

...Amongst other things.

Chapter 18

When he woke up early the next day, his keen senses were still able to discern the dry, arid scent of Minnesota soil that clung to his clothes - unwelcome remnants of the previous night's festivities. His brow furrowed as he spared the soiled suit a glance, already neatly arranged on the suit rack in the corner.

It would have to be dry-cleaned. He would drop it off at the cleaner's tomorrow, but for now; he had somewhere he needed to be.

He stretched in place, smoothing the wrinkles in his sleep pants habitually as he curled his bare feet into the carpet, delighting at the sensation as the plush material slid between his toes. He let the pre-dawn light wash over him, chest bare and almost ethereal in the fractured, orange-red glow.

He wandered over to the closet, his movements purposeful and practiced as he selected a brown suit coat; it was more casual than his usual fare but better suited for field work, sacrificing neither style nor pleasure. The weather had been mild in Minnesota of late and he expected the city of Duluth to be no different.

He let his mind wander as he sliced a particularly juicy Italian tomato into quarter-sized cubes, the choice spoils of his trip to the market the day before. Jack had already called, catching him in the middle of his morning absolutions to inform him that he was going to be deposed in court. It would be just him and Will today. The timing was almost *too* fortuitous to be believed.

He couldn't have asked for a better opportunity.

Will Graham was not prone to trusting easily, and especially after the events of their first meeting, he needed an in, an offering perhaps, to bring himself back into the man's good graces. *And he knew just how to start.*

He sprinkled a handful of fresh oregano over the sausages, letting them fry in their own juices as the enticing aroma wafted through the kitchen. His mind wandered as he worked, finding himself uncharacteristically prone to nostalgia as he considered what type of coffee to brew for the journey - a dark roast perhaps, South American, but with a hint of boldness – something that would complement the egg scramble but not overwhelm it.

He threw a dish towel over his dress shirt, the grey pinstripes providing a subtle contrast against the thick material, allowing the memories to wash over him as he cracked an egg into the pan. His lips quirked upward as one particular memory rose over the others, in fact it only seemed appropriate considering the circumstances.

Speaking of second meetings.

He had been walking past the training yard when he'd heard it, an almost torturous sounding grunt followed by the sudden, choppy release of an arrow leaving a bow string. He was

vaguely curious, especially considering that it was well after their evening meal and no one their age would be likely to give up their personal time for *more* training. He hopped the fence and approached from the side - careful to stay out of range lest he startle the archer.

His suspicions were only confirmed when he caught sight of Galahad alone in the yard. He bit down on an amused smile as the colt hefted the bow, struggling to pull back the string as he tried to use the same weapon he and others had only just advanced to using. It was five years too early for the boy and it was clear that he didn't have the muscle for it, not yet. But that fact certainly didn't seem to stop him from trying.

It had been six months since the boy and his party had arrived, six months since he'd been slowly nursed back to health and allowed to begin his training. And while he'd had little dealing with him since that first day, he'd heard that the cub had taken to it voraciously – but not for all the right reasons.

He watched with no small amount of interest, fingers thumbing a tear in the fabric of his trousers as Galahad struggled to pull back the bowstring. The boy had skill, potential. But it wasn't being channeled, or the boy wasn't letting it, either way, his progress had stalled. He had a good eye for the bow and a good arm for spear-work, his body, however, had yet to catch up.

He let the boy struggle for a few minutes before he broke the silence, causing him to jump in surprise, letting go of the arrow far too soon as it flopped impotently to the ground only a few meters shy of where it'd started.

"Do not mistake inexperience for weakness," he remarked, tone deliberately uninterested, feigning an attention that was far more casual that was actually truthful. The boy didn't need to feel like he was being coddled, even if it was apparent that he needed it.

The colt glared, running a hand through his dark curls, already slick with sweat at the temples despite the absence of the sun.

"I don't care, I want to learn. I just want to get this over with. To do my time and return home," the boy snapped, his temper unruly, but stubborn in a way that belayed skill rather than empty bluster.

"If you view your time here as a prison sentence, it will never be anything more," he pointed out, leaning against the fence post as he examined his nails with a critical eye - giving Galahad his space as the boy's lips twisted.

"A sentence for a crime none of us ever committed!" he broke in, voice cracking in the way most boys are prone to in their younger years. "The desire to live free, free of Roman rule, *shouldn't* carry a death sentence!" Galahad continued, drawing the bow string back to his cheek, aiming at the target as his arms visibly quivered.

"Do you think your words are the only ones of dissent here? Do you truly believe you are alone in your anger?" he asked, fixing the colt with an impassive glare as the boy's grip on the bow string slackened.

"Well, how do you view it then?" the younger challenged, kicking up a spray of dirt as if to highlight his outburst as he looked up at him through his messy fringe.

"As an *opportunity*. The Romans may have been our enemy, and perhaps, they are still. But remember, it was *them* that bested us in battle, *them* that negotiated the compromise that has gathered us all here. Tell me, is it wise to reject what they offer? To turn down their training and lessons of strategy simply because they emerged the victor and us the conquered? Why not *use* it instead?" he asked, the rough wool of his shirt catching against the fencepost as he shifted in place, running an idle hand through his dark brown hair, as the wind picked up.

"Someday, we will leave this place, we will travel home and carve out something of this world for ourselves, why not enter into that freedom with the knowledge that we are capable to face it, whatever that fate might be," he offered, straightening from his perch against the fence and walking forwards, hand gesturing off towards the main encampment as the colt took a step back.

"Besides, the Romans will not be able to hold Britain forever. They have overstretched their coffers; even now, across the sea, Rome is rotting. It's a slow rot, one that has been growing since before both you and I were born, before our *fathers-fathers* walked this earth. But sooner or later, Rome *will* fall. And what we learn here we will teach *our* sons, and they will teach theirs and perhaps someday we will meet the Romans' again, only this time, under our *own banners*, as free men. As *Sarmations*," he imparted, his voice a baseline thrum as something in the man's expression shifted, *softened*, and after a long moment, perhaps for the first time since he'd arrived at Hadrian's wall, the boy smiled.

The next day, he watched from the fence as Galahad began practicing with the beginners bow. And each day after that, he sat silently behind him, watching as the colt's anger slowly evolved, turning into determination and eventually even pride as every day of practice brought them that much closer to the freedom they all longed for.

The man's room was dark when he pulled up to the hotel, its drapes pulled and windows shuttered, as if to smother the room and it's occupant from within. It provided a certain ambiance he found familiar, if not morbidly charming. What was it that the man was trying to keep out? What demons haunted him in his dreams?

Or should he say, who?

The man answered the door in his sleep clothes. He was a tempting mess of sheet-creased skin and crusted lashes, his dark curls were delightfully mussed and sweat slicked at the temples. *He'd overslept.* But if the man felt any discomfort, whether at his presence or his current predicament, he gave no sign, grudgingly allowing him entry when he realized there was no other option available to him.

Clearly, the man was still irritated with him, but unless he was very much mistaken, that would quickly change. After all, what was that American saying? The best way into a man's heart was through his stomach?

Chapter 19

"I am very careful about what I put into my body, which means I end up preparing most meals myself," he explained, unclipping the lid on the first container with a satisfied air. He pretended not to notice as the man quickly slipped into a wrinkled pair of jeans and joined him at the table. *The illusion of privacy was always better than nothing at all.*

"A little protein scramble to start off the day," he offered, passing him the bowl, "some eggs, some sausage."

And pride aside, Will dug in without hesitation, pausing, if only for a moment, as the favors burst across his tongue. The younger man's words of praise were genuine as he spoke around a mouthful. "Mmm, that is delicious, thank you."

The corners of his lips turned upwards as he watched him dish the rest onto his plate, spearing another mouthful in quick succession. If Mr. Harold Felting were still alive today, which, thankfully for them, he was not, he might be glad to know that his intestines, when appropriately spiced, were actually *remarkably* tender.

"My pleasure."

He waited a few beats, long enough for Will to sample the coffee before continuing. He finally had the man alone and he certainly wasn't about to waste the opportunity to spar with him.

"I would apologize for my analytical ambush, but I know I will soon be apologizing again and I know you will tire of that eventually so I have to consider using apologies sparingly," he offered, deciding to clear the air from yesterday.

"Just keep it professional," Will replied, reaching for his mug, averting his eyes for a long moment before he forced himself to look across the table. Not quite meeting his eyes but his tone firm nonetheless.

There had been something in the younger man's pause that made him wonder if Will actually knew he was playing out a first meeting that had already happened. The possibility was titillating to say the least, thrilling him in spite of himself and spurring him to continue.

"Or we could socialize like adults," he returned, fork gentling under a bit of egg as he chased a cut of sausage around the rim. "God forbid we become friendly," he added, taking an overly indulgent bite.

"I don't find you that interesting," Will remarked, taking a careful sip from his mug as he turned his attention back to his plate.

This time his smirk was internal, hidden behind false layers of polite deference and carefully constructed composure before he replied. "You will."

He'd watched the man carefully throughout the rest of their meal, trying to determine if he'd felt it, that *spark*, something that went back through the ages, deeper than time itself. But after his response there was only a flicker of polite humor then nothing. Just the scrape of utensil against plate and a few deliberately veiled answers as to what the rest of the day might hold.

He let it go. It was too early to get discouraged after all, far too early.

A few hours later, blood spatter would skim down the man's stubble-roughened cheeks. It would cover his skin in a fine mist of crimson as Garrett Jacob Hobbs bled out against the kitchen cabinets, his job only half done as his daughter choked on her own blood, just centimeters away.

His Will had been *striking* then, a singular point of light amidst a heady tableau of lesser bodies. In fact, he hadn't been able to resist lingering, stalling in place as the man fumbled with the wound on Abigail's neck, pawing at it ineffectually as red trickled down the lens of his glasses. The man's mouth was open, stuttering out words, lips shocked into a gape that threatened to let a few wayward drops dribble inwards.

Would he remember the taste? Would part of him revel in it? Tasting his enemy's blood on his tongue as his sword found its mark.

It was only when the girl began to spasm, neck leaking red as Will tried to retain his grip around the wound, that he decided to act. He felt the man's eyes on him as he knelt down, his wide palms forming a brace around her neck as the girl's wide, doe-brown eyes locked on his - sensing stability amidst a devolving world.

He'd seen Galahad staring back at him for a split second as he batted the man's hands away, taking over with hardly a ripple as the cadence of the man's breathing grew harsh and shallow. *The prelude to a panic attack.*

The man had the look of innocence on him then, innocence and long ingrained guilt. Guilt not for the life he'd taken or the grief that would shadow those it left behind, but guilt because deep down, he *liked* it. And what was more was that his body *remembered*. Instinct and repression clashing together as the man struggled to breathe.

He looked up at one point and met the man's stare. And despite the fact that he had Abigail's lifeblood trickling between his fingers, he had to hold himself back from taking the man right then and there. He struggled against the desire to seize the man and lick him clean as pearls of blood thickened along the curve of his cheeks, getting caught between laugh lines as pebbles of red caressed the curl of his neck and the arch of his collar.

The foreshadowing felt like *foreplay* for the senses.

In the days that followed the discovery and subsequent death of the now infamous Minnesota shrike, he would often resurrect the conversation they shared over breakfast. While Will quietly recovered, patching up the widening holes that peppered his psyche like a captain struggling to keep his sinking ship afloat as water poured in through the seams, he turned the man's words over in his mind.

Will's response to him at breakfast was a treat he had not anticipated. The casual banter, the base tension, the posturing of two confident males locked up in their respective boxes of civility. It had been a delight to behold.

It had seemed easy. Easy in a way their first meeting with Jack had not. Will took cues from his presence naturally. He doubted he was aware of it, but subconsciously, something in him knew. The part of Will that was *his* Galahad knew.

And like a spring that had been wound too tight, eventually something had to give.

In many ways it was a mirror of their first interaction – or should he say, their first *real* interaction. Galahad had been flighty, even then, with wide angry eyes reminiscent of a child freshly pulled from his mother's apron strings. The boy had been brimming with resentment as he'd been introduced to the other recruits. He was the last of his group to recover and he still had the look of sickness about him. But the women who had been tending to him since he'd arrived had long whispered about his stubbornness. It was the first time he'd been out of his sick bed since he'd arrived at the wall and in all honesty, he looked it.

Despite the serendipitous nature of their first meeting, when he'd caught the colt halfway to the ground, the boy's eyes had slid over his, coal-black and disdainful, before looking away just as quickly, as if what he saw was of no more interest to him than a pile of dung or a lop-sided fence post.

It didn't remain that way for long. *He'd made sure of it.*

In many ways, he didn't know for certain Will was *his* Galahad until the man killed Garret Jacob Hobbs. He knew because it was a mirror expression of his first kill. His face a half-finished mosaic of sorrow and shock, rage and blood lust - stinking of iron and adrenaline as he'd roared his defiance, fist beating his breastplate even as his knees had trembled. And now, just as he'd been in that field overlooking the British moors hundreds of miles away from the safety of Hadrian's wall, he was *irresistible*. The man known to this world as Will Graham was a perfect mixture of self-loathing and genius, ability and morality, ruthlessness and remorse.

The man was exquisite.

It was only when he'd washed Abigail Hobbs' blood off his hands that he crossed the hall. He ignored the usual frenzied rush of the ICU as he sought out a payphone, tired in spite of himself, but content to wait for Will to arrive. The lingering strains of adrenaline were drip-drying in his veins, filtering out of his system as he kept an eye on the activity around Abigail's room. Will would be here, likely sooner rather than later, morality and guilt driving him to make sure that the girl made it through the night. And while he felt neither, he realized he had intended to do the same long before the ambulance doors had slammed closed and he'd watched William fade into the distance, a delectable shadow of arterial spatter and haunted eyes.

Perhaps Will wasn't the only one who'd let the girl get under his skin. The concept, by itself, was as intriguing as the possibilities were endless. Only time would tell on that particular facet. But either way, he looked forward to the reveal.

He found an unoccupied payphone across from the nurses' station, noticing with a flitter of irritation that there was still blood caught underneath his nails. He punched in the number, feeding the machine a handful of coins as the dial tone hummed through the receiver.

His lip curled, the action slight but undeniably feral as a tall, wide shouldered man pushed past him, jostling against his shoulder and cutting off an elderly woman who trying to make her way around the corner in a walker a few meters ahead. The woman's IV bag tilted ominously, steadied by a quick thinking nurse who had been trailing in her wake. The elderly woman barely noticed, but the nurse glared daggers at the man's departing back.

His fingers twitched, caressing a phantom blade. *He would have to return later*. The hospital apparently had need of *his* expertise.

It took a number of seconds before the call connected, but when it did, he spoke only three words. His voice was steady, despite the thrill of anticipation that curled up his spine as he finally gave his voice to his feelings, reliving the moment like he had when he'd seen the man for the first time as Arthur's greeting, rough and freshly woken, echoed through the receiver.

"I found him."

Chapter 20

Galahad had always been a bit neurotic, a bit wounded by the skills that had come to him naturally. He was prone to mood swings, known to be laughing one moment, carving his sword through soft Woad flesh, only to show signs of empathizing with their plight the next. And much like when Will had shot Garrett Jacob Hobbs, that *same* expression had adorned the man's blood splattered cheeks.

He'd looked wounded, *nauseated* as the blood lust had curled up in the back of his throat – choking him as he'd shuddered under its sway. The reality of it clear on his face as he tried to tell himself that it wasn't true, that he didn't like it as much as he feared he did - as he'd *suspected* he would all along.

Killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs' only made those neuroses a thousand times worse.

It was a visceral thing, watching the man's face shift as the last gunshot echoed into the sudden still. It was a transformation, an *expression* that had been his alone to behold and understand. *In fact, no one save for him ever could.* He knew this man, or at least who he'd once been, he knew him better than the man knew himself. He'd borne witness to every flaw, every perfection, curiosity, scar and wrinkle. So, in a sense, even though his acquaintance with Will Graham was still in its infancy, he believed himself to be a good judge of them both.

Unsurprisingly, it seemed as though that guilt, that unbridled jumble of a *moral compass* had followed him through the ages, evolving into a sort of survival mechanism, something he needed in order to navigate this new world. Because in this life, blood lust, even when justified, was an outlet that was lawfully denied to them all.

In the past, back when Rome had demanded their service, they'd all had their own individual ways of justifying it, what they did in the name of a cause that was not their own. Arthur fought for his knights and the vision of Rome he'd held onto since his infancy, a veritable Eden of order and burgeoning ideas. Dagonet had always seen the need to ensure that his skills were performed on fair ground, often wading into battle physically outnumbered simply to ensure the gods that he wasn't taking advantage of the talents they'd seen fit to gift him with.

Lancelot was fierce, both in battle and in life, he laughed the loudest, womanized and diced, but in truth he repressed far more than he ever expressed. His quickness to laugh only masked the fact that he was fighting for a home he knew he'd never see. Bors fought for his woman, for his veritable brood of children; he fought and killed like he loved, wholeheartedly and without reservation. Gawain fought with the fierceness of a man who perceived the concept of a future stretching out before him. He ended lives so that he might keep his. Out of everyone, he'd always seen the man was being one of the few who would actually make the journey home, to live out his days lost amidst the long grass, siring strong Sarmation sons to follow in his wake. The man had the heart for it, that much was certain.

He himself had always relied on strategy and skill. He chose his opponents whenever possible, preferring a challenge, a formidable opponent rather than melee killing. He'd never had the desire to slaughter a tearful mother's adolescent sons simply because he could. Simply because Rome had decreed that they were the enemy. There was no honor in that, no *beauty*. In his mind there was no greater measure of a man than in the moments where they could see their death in another man's eyes. Knowing they were evenly matched as the dance began. Galahad had always done what had to be done, cutting down the enemy by way of spear and bow, and agonized about the morality of it later.

But at the end of the day, like any man, any *soldier* born in that time, they'd fought for their survival. And perhaps not for the better, that reality had changed, becoming murky and uncertain under the laws of the present day. Now, a man who was simply trying to protect his family from an late night intruder could be held accountable for said intruder's medical bills, effectively bankrupting themselves to pay for a stranger's, who had meant them only ill-will, recovery. Thousands of years ago, ending that pathetic excuse for a life would have been seen as *justice* – even in the eyes of the law.

Yet, even with due cause, Will Graham's mind refused to let go of the life he'd ended, absorbing Hobbs into his very blood as if the man's memory were some sort of infectious disease.

Apparently the old adage was true. *Poke around a psychopath's mind, and you're bound to get poked back.*

So, at the risk of sounding blunt, or at the very least self-absorbed, he wasn't at all surprised that Will found his way back to his office so soon. He knew it wasn't entirely by the man's choosing, but it was a start.

Jack had called ahead, and by the time Will's timid knock echoed through his office, he already had the man's psychological evaluation half finished.

The man brushed past him as he entered, and on reflex, he inhaled. The man didn't notice, too immersed in himself to pay the oddity any real attention. Even his scent was conflicted, a cacophonous medley of cheap fabric softener and a particular, almost musty scent he could only equate to that of wet dog. But that was only the surface, underneath the obvious, it was a different story. Will smelt of exhaustion, it was a subtle scent, with an underlying tang of fear that threatened to overtake everything else.

The curve of his neck smelt almost fever-warm, of skin scrubbed raw – shot through with a hint of burnt ozone. It was almost as if the man had stayed in the shower far too long, scrubbing at his reddening skin with the blunt edge of his nails just to be sure that every drop of Garrett Jacob Hobbs' blood had been stripped from his skin.

He imagined the man's frustrated tears mingling with the running water when he realized that no amount of scrubbing would ever rid himself of it, not completely. Not *this* stain. Not *this* kill. It was beautiful, in a macabre sort of way, phantasmagorical and dark.

"What's that?" Will asked, watching him approach from the relative safety of the loft, his eyes on the piece of paper in his hand. The man's choice to take the high ground had not

escaped him. He knew it was more for the man's piece of mind than anything else, attempting to set the tone between them as one of a power play. But to him, it came out more like a defensive tactic than anything else. More than that, it stank of insolence, it was childish and unattractive, but he was content to it ignore it. *For now.*

"Your psychological evaluation, you're totally functional and more or less sane. Well done," he replied with a smirk, watching with interest as the man approached the ladder, his hands shoved deep in his pockets.

Sullen.

"Did you just rubber stamp me?" the man asked, his expression caught between a frown and grudging amusement.

"Yes, Jack Crawford may lay his weary head to rest knowing he didn't break you and our conversation can proceed unobstructed by paperwork," he responded, unrepentant.

The man paced.

"Jack thinks I need therapy."

"What you need is a way out of dark places when Jack sends you there," he replied countering the emotion with an explanation that was just as applicable but far more gentle in terms of vocabulary. Therapy had gained far too many negative connotations in the past three decades, especially when coupled together with members of law enforcement. Those stereotypes had become a serious hurdle in terms of treatment.

"Last time he sent me into a dark place, I brought something back," the younger man pointed out.

"A surrogate daughter." It wasn't a question, despite the inflection behind it, they both knew better. He sensed the man's sudden attention. But Will remained silent. Undeterred, he made to speak again.

"You saved Abigail Hobbs' life but you also orphaned her. It comes with certain emotional obligations regardless of empathy disorders," he offered, attempting to bore a hole through the loneliness the man wore like a shield.

And just like he knew he would, Will took the bait.

"You were there, you saved her life to. Do you feel obligated?" Will asked, searching. Yet another tentative whimper uttered into the dark to ensure he wasn't alone.

He met the man's stare without reservation. The man would *never* be alone, had *never* been alone, not while they, the brotherhood of Hadrian's Wall, still took breath.

"Yes," he answered honestly. "I feel a staggering amount of obligation. I feel responsibility. I fantasized about scenarios where my actions may have allowed a different fate for Abigail Hobbs."

The expression on the man's face was clear; relief was etched deep into his skin as he grasped at the coat tails of their growing camaraderie. Unknowingly taking solace in their shared experience.

"Jack thinks Abigail Hobbs helped her dad kill those girls."

"How does that make you feel?" he asked, the phrase almost second nature after so many years in the field.

"How does it make *you* feel?" Will retorted, throwing the words back at him in a way that told him they'd gone right back to where they'd started in terms of insolence and willingness to express themselves openly. It was yet another reminder that he had to tread carefully as far as Will was concerned. One wrong word, one misstep and the man would close up.

"I find it vulgar."

"Me too," Will replied, so fast the man nearly tripped over his own tongue, like a child desperate for attention but suspicious by nature. Experience had taught Will Graham that the world was nothing like it seemed and thus he approached it as such. Like a wounded animal liable to snap back, regardless of your good intentions.

"…And entirely possible," he added, listening as the man's pacing hitched in mid-step, his movements awkward and stilted for a split-second before returning to normal.

"That's not what happened," Will insisted.

"Jack will ask her when she wakes up. Or he will have one of us ask her," he pointed out.

"Is this therapy or is this a support group?" the man snapped, though with remarkably little heat considering the circumstances.

He looked up, considering.

"It's whatever you need it to be," he replied, watching as Will leaned on the banister, as though suddenly tired.

He cocked his head. The man was distracted, open, and most of all, *vulnerable*. He jumped at the opportunity.

"And Will? The mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of yourself, not the worst of someone else," he affirmed, letting the younger man feel the firmness of his voice and the surety that lurked underneath as he forced the profiler to meet his gaze. His eyes caressed the shadows that filtered across his face as the evening grew late.

He had to force himself not to say anything more. He had to leave him wanting, Will had to learn to come to *him* from now on, rather than be ordered to by Jack. It was the only way he could face the man on equal ground, the only way he could eventually get through to him.

And really, if only the man knew how true that statement actually was…

Chapter 21

Will was already waiting for him by the time he finished with one of his more difficult clients, an overworked powerhouse of a CEO with deeply seeded feelings of inadequacy despite her many accomplishments and budding social life. Most of these perceived failings stemmed from abandonment issues suffered in her early childhood by an emotionally absent mother and an overbearing father. Who, coupled together, would have likely given even the popularly termed 'helicopter parents' of today a significant run for their money.

She was his last regular client of the day and despite the last minute nature of Will's arrival, he welcomed his visit. He only had one other client after him, Miss. Kimbel, a potential new patient who had been very insistent about her appointment time. It was a facet that was hardly unusual when it came to personality disorders. People who felt as though they had little control of the world around them often compensated by applying rigorous, and uncompromisingly strict control over their personal lives.

Will placed the letter containing his psychological assessment on the desk. "I think this may have been premature," the man greeted, keeping his distance as he crossed the room to join him. Still, he believed it to be an improvement from their last session where the man had haunted the loft for the majority of their appointment.

He reached forward on reflex, fingers tracing the elegant loops of his signature as he considered his reply before voicing it.

"What did you see? Out in the field?" he asked, recognizing the mania that lurked underneath the surface of the man's words, the stench of uncertainty and fear was pervasive. *Almost overwhelming.*

"…Hobbs," the man admitted quietly. His body language was understated and almost childish as his chin seemed to tuck into his chest for a long moment, seeking comfort from within but correcting the behavior before he could glean anything from it.

"An association?" he suggested. It wouldn't be uncommon after all, especially considering the man's empathy disorder.

"No, a *hallucination*. I saw him lying there, in someone else's grave!" Will replied, shaking his head.

"Did you tell Jack what you saw?" he asked, already well aware of the answer.

The man's face twisted, hands curling into fists as he started to pace. "No."

"It's stress," he assured, looking down at the piece of paper with a surety that the other man probably hadn't felt since Jack had put him back in the field. But for once, it wasn't an exaggeration. In all likelihood it was stress. Pulling the trigger and ending a life was a traumatic experience no matter a person's occupation or prior experience. Though, he suspected the event had caused deeper issues in the man's psyche than even Will himself was

aware of - ruptures that would eat away at him as memories he didn't recognize slowly bubbled up from the cracks. Which, of course, served his purpose quite nicely.

"Not worth reporting," he added, watching calmly as the man circled the room, rubbing at his neck in agitation.

Could the man feel it? The slow loss of control? Inevitable and close. The growing realization that was lurking just underneath the surface? …Waiting.

"You displaced the victim of another killer's crime with what could arguably be considered your victim," he cautioned, one hand finding its way to his trouser pocket as he considered the man's position.

"I don't consider Hobbs my victim," Will replied, tone unquestionably firm as he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. A frown flirted with the downturn of his lips, clearly not willing to continue unless he was prompted.

"What do you consider him?"

"Dead," Will grunted. The bluntness took him aback, if only for a moment. He sensed that there was something more there, something that the man didn't want to acknowledge. Something important.

He decided to risk it.

"Is it harder imagining the thrill someone else feels killing, now that you've done it yourself?" he asked, gaze carefully blank, yet open as he met the man's stare from across the close distance.

The pause was cryptic, tense. Will seemed to be looking right at him, blinking owlishly. Shock and surprise were written across his face like paint splashed half-hazardly across a canvas. Messy, yet still beautiful.

Another moment passed and the suspense seemed almost sensual, erotic. Like a lover pressing soft kisses down the length of a thigh, growing noticeably teasing as they neared the groin.

A lesser man might have even held their breath.

But when Will finally nodded, despite the brevity of the moment, it felt a lot like a puzzle piece locking into place, like he was that much closer to having Galahad back and-

He forced himself to take a step back, mentally and physically. He couldn't risk overwhelming the man, not yet.

Still, he almost caught his breath at the man's omission. His gaze lingering on the way the man's expression crumpled as he admitted it. The younger man looked half shocked at his own daring as he eased him through it – his gaze bland and accepting as Will's resistance slowly gave way, opening up, if only marginally, as his admittance flowed through the air above their heads like a tantalizing perfume.

And despite the uncertainty of the moment, he couldn't help but feel as though this was a significant step forward.

"The arms, why did he leave them exposed?" he asked, changing the subject back to the case in Elk Neck forest in the guise of a peace offering, a reward for good behavior as he approached the younger man from around the desk. He smiled internally as Will nearly fell over himself in relief - clearly pleased with the change of topics.

"To hold their hands?" he theorized. "To feel the life leaving their bodies?" he asked, watching as Will leaned up against one of the columns, inching away subtly as he approached.

The man hissed in a breath through his teeth in a sharp negative. "No, that's too esoteric for someone who took the time to bury his victims in straight lines. He is more practical," the younger man explained, limbs restless as he neared the desk.

He considered what he'd heard on the news in comparison to Will's insights. "He was cultivating them."

"He was keeping them alive, he was feeding them intravenously," Will agreed.

"But your farmer let his crops die. Save for the one that didn't," he pointed out, getting drawn into the discussion as the man opened up. The flow of ideas was almost effortless as they bandied theories back and forth.

"Well, and the one that didn't, died on the way to the hospital," Will retorted, body language wounded as he pushed on. "But they weren't the crops, they were the *fertilizer*. Their bodies were covered in fungus," he clarified, giving voice to something he'd been suspecting as the conversation wore on.

It was not the killing that satisfied this predator, but the result. *The creation*. It was a mindset to which he could relate. Only this killer craved a different sort of end game. It was the connection his victims forged with the forest around them that he cared about. The killer envied their ability to connect, and in a sense was searching for a connection of his own.

"The structure of a fungus mirrors that of a human brain," he allowed, choosing his words carefully, "an intricate web of connections."

Will's agreement was clear. "Maybe he admires their ability to connect. The way human minds can't," the profiler mused, rubbing a hand across his face as he straightened.

"Yours can," he pointed out, leaning over the desk and fixing the man with a significant look.

Will's laughter was infectious.

"Yeah, well, not physically," the younger man chuckled, the humor dying in his throat in a way that made him long for a different outcome.

He straightened. "Is that what your farmer is looking for?" he asked, "some sort of connection?"

The man struggled, noncommittal but distracted, as if he were turning the words over and over in his head, considering. The man remained that way for almost the rest of the appointment, his thoughts internal and guarded.

It had been a joy to watch. One intellectual to another.

In many ways, Will Graham was a cage, a cage both *from* and *against* the world. *Against the truth – the truth about who he was.* His gifts, his ability to empathize regardless of the situation or person only worsened the disassociation. After all, wouldn't it make it harder to come back to yourself when you weren't exactly sure of who you were in the first the place? When everything from your life, to your memories and dreams, could easily be compared to trying on an ill-fitting shoe?

The man was complex but charming. A blended palate of dominant and submissive traits, shaky and unstable despite the strong mask he wore. He was ripe, ripe for the plucking and already half broken. All he needed was a push, a push and the assurance that he wasn't alone, that he would never be alone again, and the man would ready.

And he had every intention of being the person to do it.

In fact, he insisted.

Chapter 22

It was only when he finally retired for the evening, his mind still caught up in re-examining every detail of his encounter with the formidable Miss. Lounds, cataloging all the intricacies and insights he'd gathered, that he realized he was distracted. But it wasn't Freddie Lounds that was the cause of it, rather, it was Will himself. Unbeknownst to him at the time, their discussion earlier regarding the serial killer who'd been cultivating his victims as fertilizer for his fungus had brought forth a memory. Something that had been lurking on the edge of his conscious mind long before he'd even bid Will goodnight, insisting upon being heard.

The man had been distracted, torn, with half of his mind still reeling over his encounter with Garret Jacob Hobbs and the other immersed in his current case, in the human garden their serial killer had been keeping in the deepest confines of Elk Neck forest. Nine victims, nine plots.

But that hadn't been the only thing revealed during their session. He was making progress with the younger man. That much was apparent. Will was beginning to question himself, not just his stability or ability to continue working with his condition, but himself, his own memories. Perhaps along with his presence, killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs had awoken far more than a single determined ghost.

Again, only time would tell.

He shrugged out of his suit jacket, rolling up his shirt sleeves as he walked, each movement fluid and easy as he gave his mind free reign, indulgent to a fault as a memory he'd long forgotten rose to the surface. He was having Jack Crawford over for dinner, and after his negotiations with Miss. Lounds, he had less preparation time than he'd like. As easy to impress as Agent Crawford was, it was more a point of personal pride than anything else.

The journey back home, back to the wall was slow, tedious and bulky with the addition of the bishop's carriage and his wounded guards. It gave him too much time to think, his mind dwelling on things he'd rather not. Problems he didn't have it in him yet to solve. And as it so happened, he wasn't the only one.

"I don't like him, the Roman. If he's here to discharge us, why doesn't he just give us our papers?" Galahad glowered, riding abreast with Bors and Gawain as he trailed behind, teeth and tongue worrying the blood from between his fingers, eager to rid himself of it while it was still fresh.

"Is this your happy face?" Gawain teased, causing the three of them to break out into laughter as even Galahad was forced to let go of an amused chuckle.

"Galahad, do you still not know the Romans? They won't scratch their ass without holding a ceremony," Gawain remarked, chortling into his beard as the carriage creaked, wheels jerking as the horses navigated along the rocky path.

"Why don't you just kill him and then discharge yourself after?" Bors grunted, half serious as the bishop's man servant complained loudly behind them, going on about wildlings and ill-kept roads like the Roman soldier riding beside him actually cared.

But Galahad only shook his head, his expression a rictus of a disingenuous smile. The corners of his lips arched upwards into an expression that would have been more suited to a snarl than anything else as he dug his heels into his horse's side and eased himself in beside the younger man.

"I don't kill for pleasure, *unlike some*," Galahad retorted, looking at him directly this time, his gaze needling and dismissive as the memory of their argument from the night before rose to the surface, simmering and resentful.

Like a spit of oil slicking across the surface of a pail of water, things between them remained unresolved. It was a caustic mixture, yet one that refused to set itself alight. Not without help.

But he wasn't swayed; the man would get no quarter from him. Not this time. All he'd done was tell the truth, he would not get drawn into another debate over something that had not been meant to wound in the first place.

"Well, you should try it sometime; you might get a taste for it," he returned, leaning forward in his saddle as the younger man's lips twisted. His meaning was clear despite his level tone, calling out the younger man on his falsehood as Gawain laughed good naturedly.

Galahad remained silent.

"It's a part of you; it's in your blood," Bors rasped, absolute, as if he were voicing a fact rather than an opinion. And for once, he agreed with him.

"No, no, no," the man began, voice emphatic as he shook his head. "No, as of tomorrow, this was all just a bad memory."

And in the pause that followed, it was hard not to picture that small, gangly creature who'd once struggled with a bow far too big for him. In some ways the man had come so far, yet in others, he was still wounded, still resentful.

Because deep down, he knew that the man's words had another meaning as well. For it wasn't just his experience at Hadrian's Wall the man was so eager to be rid of, but *him* as well. And as the others talked, idly passing the time musing on what they would do when they were discharged, he gnawed on the inside of his cheek until his tasted smelted copper against his tongue - deep in thought.

He didn't regret his decision. After all, how could he? He knew in his heart what he *needed*, what he *wanted* out of life after his service to the Romans had ended. But he did regret what that ultimately meant - the fact that Galahad *wouldn't*, no, *couldn't* follow him. Fate was pulling them in opposite directions and neither him nor Galahad were dealing well with the fallout.

Anger and regret rose up in the back of his throat like bile, *like a sickness*, unfamiliar and slippery. He bit down on a retort, forcing himself not to retaliate, to say something he might regret. He had more control than that.

Galahad ignored him, showing him his back as he let his horse fall behind, feigning interest elsewhere as Gawain shot him a quizzical look. His face revealed nothing, merely giving the man a nod until Gawain turned his attention back to the conversation at hand. His fingers clenched around the bridle, whistling to his falcon as they neared the main gates. The younger man had made his feelings clear. He was hurt, angry, and it would appear as though that wasn't going to change anytime soon.

He needed to clear his head.

He arrived back in the present only to find himself braced against the kitchen counter, pain needling through his fingers and his nails dug deep into the marble counter top. Anger and, strangely, remorse flowed through him as a bead of sweat threatened to trickle down from his hairline. He blinked. He hadn't had a reaction like this since that night in the clearing, nearly a decade ago.

He drew in a ragged breath.

The naked want behind the emotions he'd unknowingly dredged up had almost overwhelmed him. It was an unprecedented loss of control, something that bothered him more than the existence of the emotions themselves. *This was affecting him more than he realized, having Will so close. He had the man in his grasp and yet, for all intents and purposes, Will was still completely untouchable.*

He forced himself to straighten, smoothing his cuffs and retrieving his suit jacket as he regained control of himself. His long fingers gentled through his hair as he combed it back into place, lingering just long enough for the action to be termed a caress as he padded towards the den.

He paused in mid-step, considering. He had a decently aged Cognac in the drawing room. Perhaps dinner could wait.

It was only when he'd poured himself a snifter, swirling the dark amber liquid around in his glass, settling deep into the recesses of one of his leather armchairs that he let his thoughts roam back towards the matter at hand. The emotions had been so raw, so visceral. And rightfully so, because that was how they'd left it. He'd fallen in battle only a few days later, leaving more than just words unsaid between them. It wasn't right. He'd come to the conclusion, perhaps the very same day that they were reunited that there was far more than simply Will Graham and Galahad's future at stake, but his *own* as well.

Now more than ever he knew he had to get through to the man. He had to bring him back, not just for Arthur or the others, but for *him*. And regardless of how discomforting the idea that he might actually need something or, in fact, *someone else*, the impression remained.

His hand tightened around the glass, the man was *his*, his in every way that mattered. The colt would remember that before the end.

He fell asleep that night with that memory foremost on his mind. And for the first time in a long time, his sleep was restless.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He was about to leave for the day when he received a call from Jack. Something had happened at the hospital. Will arrived ten minutes later than he'd expected, smelling of sweat, old newspaper and, rather disturbingly, animal dung. *Pig dung to be precise.*

The smell was most distracting.

The man was preoccupied, almost hyper-active, all but humming with restless energy and adrenaline from the moment he opened the door. His hands were clean but the skin under the nails was still dirty, he'd driven straight here. Despite the smell, he supposed he should be flattered. This time, coming to him had been instinctual, he doubted the man had barely questioned it when he'd left the hospital and found himself taking the last exit onto the freeway, driving the forty miles that existed between them with barely a second thought in regards to the distance.

Will was starting to trust him. Rely on him. And this was just the beginning.

After nine known kills Eldon Stammets had been apprehended. And despite Freddie Lounds, interference, Abigail Hobbs was once again safely back in the ICU – still in a coma, blissfully unaware that she had almost died for a second time in less than a week. He resolved to visit her the next day and consult with her doctor; he clearly wasn't being kept abreast of her progress, despite their promises.

"I should have stuck to fixing boat motors in Louisiana," Will sighed, clearly conflicted as their conversation progressed, finally sitting down in the chair across the desk. His body language, perhaps unknowingly, displayed an open invitation for him to do the same.

The man was ready, ready to accept his help and guidance. But whether he'd admitted that much to himself was another matter entirely. *So stubborn his boy. So restless.*

"A boat engine is a machine, a predictable problem," he counseled. "Easy to solve. You fail, there's a paddle. Where was your paddle with Hobbs?" he asked, taking a seat across from him as the man fixed him with an empathetic look, inscrutable yet endearingly open.

"*You're* supposed to be my paddle," the man reminded, hands steepled in front of him like a man at prayer.

He mirrored the motion, radiating calm as he made to reply. "I am."

"It wasn't the act of killing Hobbs that got you down was it?" he asked, feeling again as though they were at a crossroads, a critical point, and once again he dove in without hesitation.

Will had to face the reality of his own feelings if he were to bring him out of his shell, to allow Galahad's memories to filter into the man's conscious mind, reminding him of who he was. He could only guide, suggest and direct. Much like his own experiences in the clearing, this was a discovery that had to come from within.

"Did you really feel so bad because killing him felt so good?"

Will's lip trembled, the action involuntary and quickly quashed.

"I *liked* killing Hobbs," the man whispered, the words leaving his throat like shattered glass, like it had physically *hurt* to admit.

He leaned forward, his soul singing. His blue suit jacket pulled around his waist, the rich fabric providing a stark contrast through the thinness of his dress suit.

"Killing must feel good to God too, he does it all the time. And are we not created in his image?" he asked, pleased with the comparison as the line of Will's back stiffened, like a stray dog fluffing up its hackles despite its wagging tail.

"It depends who you ask," Will replied, momentarily struggling for words before his brain settled on a path of conversation and stuck to it.

"God is terrific," he purred, sensing an opening, "he dropped a church roof on thirty-four of his worshipers last Wednesday night in Texas while they sang a hymn."

"And did God feel good about that?" Will asked, half sullen as he seemed to sink deeper into the cushions with every passing second. As if by sheer will he could avoid the affirmation he knew in his heart was coming.

"He felt powerful," he affirmed.

The look on Will's face was half wounded, half disbelieving. It was almost as if he couldn't dare to believe that someone else could mirror the thoughts he couldn't bear to speak aloud. And wounded, because no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't deny the truth of them.

The man had felt powerful when he'd killed Garret Jacob Hobbs and he had every right to be, powerful *and* guilty. *He really was Galahad to a fault.*

The next day Abigail Hobbs woke up from her coma.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I realize this chapter was a bit short; it is more of a transitional thing than anything else. The next chapter should be up Wednesday.

Chapter 24

"There was a ninth victim who also fit Abigail Hobbs' profile. But Garrett Jacob Hobbs didn't murder her. The killer who did wanted us to know that he *wasn't* the Minnesota Shrike. He is *better* than that…"

As unorthodox as it was to admit, even *he* couldn't deny the svelte *ripple* of arousal that arrowed down his spine when he'd realized what Will was lecturing about - or perhaps more pointedly, *who*. It was ill-timed and distressingly public, tediously so in fact. He would have preferred such a revelation occur in private.

Instead, he was all too aware that Jack was standing next to him, almost rubbing elbows as the photo of Abigail Hobbs and her late father flashed across the screen. Will was in mid-lecture; his students were spellbound, yet not completely unobservant. Even now they must be cataloging the new arrivals; Jack Crawford would be noticed, but summarily dismissed. He was important, feared, even respected, but a familiar entity. He, on the other hand, was new, thus interesting and perhaps even a bit exotic considering some might already know of him by reputation. His paper on social exclusion had turned many heads in the academic world, especially those in law enforcement.

Besides, it was a facet of their training to notice those that did not want to be noticed.

But instead of dampening his ardor, the public nature of his predicament only seemed to heighten the feeling.

He could feel it, simmering deep in his belly as a delicate flush of heat worked its way up his collar. He folded his coat over his arm, strategically placing it over his waist as his cock throbbed. He shifted minutely, not in discomfort, but in pleasure as the movement elicited a small hiss of friction. It was an indulgence he was only too happy to entertain.

His cock twitched, once then twice, as if in reproach for being so confined as Will's gentle Louisiana twang caressed the syllables, pointedly continuing his lecture as the younger man noticed their presence. The admiration was clear in the man's tone, discussing the possibility of the copy-cat's involvement in Hobbs' life. But for him, each word might as well have been gift wrapped in the finest silk.

His nails, blunt yet perfectly manicured, dug deep into the flesh of his palms.

"…He is an intelligent psychopath. He is a sadist. He will never kill like this again…."

An indulgent smile flirted with the corners of his lips. Even now the man knew him, *understood* him. Reflecting his thoughts, his ideas, his *desires* in such a way that the feedback was almost *sensual*. Each word was akin to that of a near physical release. The man wasn't just regurgitating his processes, parroting his thoughts and motivations, it was clear that the man had already experienced them, *lived them*, at least in part. The inflection was there in his voice, a passion that he recognized as his own.

Emotion swelled in his breast. Pride mingling with that of arousal, anticipation and finally longing. *How much longer would he have to wait?*

Even if the man *hadn't* been Galahad, he knew now that he wouldn't have been able to stop himself from pursuing him. Not after this. There were too many possibilities, too much *potential* for him to ignore. He'd never met anyone quite like him. In fact, he'd never dreamt that he could. Will Graham was an enigma, even in his experience. Never before had he met anyone who could so easily dip into his thoughts, seeing his work for what it was, *art*, even as the words 'sadist' and 'psychopath' fell from the man's lips like dirty dish water, stale and overused.

"So, how do we catch him?"

Will Graham really was too delectable for words.

All else considered, the past few days had been uncommonly busy, what with his semi-regular appointments with Will, Miss Lounds' continued interference and the events that had surrounded Abigail Hobbs' return home. Not to mention his brief night-time visit to the Hobbs' cabin with Abigail's vivacious young friend.

He'd enjoyed Miss Schurr's insolence right up to the point where his blade had flicked upwards, flush against her throat as her pulse jumped under his fingers, panicked and disbelieving. Afterwards he'd all but drowned in her fear, tasting her tears as her terrified screams had echoed into the night, shrill but impotent; there was no one within fifty miles that could hear them.

And with Will foremost on his mind, he'd savored every drop. Every inflection and half-formed smattering of emotion had been his to explore. He'd taken his time with her, *enjoyed* her. Wondering all the while what Will would look like with a scalpel winding between his fingers, hands stained to the wrists as he guided the man through his first kill. Showing him where to cut and when, teaching him the best way to preserve the meat and the most efficient method of removing the organs.

He imagined their fingers intertwining, breathless and lustful as the harsh, unsteady breathing of their prey rattled out into the dark. How they would stop, leaning down as one just to catch the sound as their victim's heartbeat slowed, their last breaths blood-soaked and thin – taking in every facet – every sigh – every gasp, liquidy and raw until all that was left was them and the taste of blood on their lips. He imagined how it would feel as his fingers dug deep into the man's curls and *pulled*. The man would gasp, he knew that instinctively, his expression screwing up in pain and surprise, offering his throat as he forced the man to grind up against his thigh, delaying both their gratification simply because he *could* – because the man's release was always that much *sweeter* when he was too far gone to be self-conscious about what he desired.

Like the beginning strains of one of Frederic Chopin's grand concertos. The wait would surely be worth it.

The masterpiece of Marissa Schurr had been a message he couldn't help but send. Not just to Abigail, but to Will, showing the man in no uncertain terms that he was not to be

underestimated, not in either profession. But, as it so often happened, his display served a dual purpose, acting as yet another nightmare that would be introduced into the man's diet.

He needed to keep Will off balance, needy, *dependent*. It was the only way he was going to get through to him.

He pulled into his driveway with an audible sigh, tired in spite of himself. He needed to be careful not to push himself too hard, what with his late night excursions. He couldn't afford to get sloppy. *Not now.*

He walked up the driveway, confident in the dark. His keen gaze missed nothing as he took in the neighborhood, noting the number of lights at his neighbors, the extra car, a dark sedan, new but not new enough to be pretentious was parked near the elderly couple's front gate four houses down. He raised a brow, intrigued. They never had visitors and when they did go out; their driver came in a Lexus.

The jingle of his keys was loud in the exaggerated quiet.

The wind shifted.

He paused on the threshold, frozen in the act of turning the key as a familiar scent rushed out to greet him, familiar but out of place. He smiled, the expression all blunt teeth and deeply cut laugh lines that stood out like open wounds in the low light.

"Good evening, Gawain."

Chapter 25

"Someday you're going to have to tell me how you do that," the man complained, his good humor evident as he closed the door and followed him into the foyer. His detective badge and holster glittered in the low light as they embraced - their handshake warm as they came together once again as *brothers.*

Gawain, known as Gareth Kalish in this life, had kept his signature long locks, yet like himself, generally abstained from facial hair. Otherwise that was the only visible difference between the man he'd grown up with and the version standing before him today.

Gawain set a bottle of wine on the kitchen counter, making a circuit around the island as he noted the changes. He'd had the kitchen renovated since the man's last visit. He paused as he read the label, a pleased smile lighting up his features as he opened a cupboard.

"If you continue to insist on bringing me Barbaresco when you visit, I might just have to," he replied, bringing out two wineglasses with a flourish as he tested the temperature and popped the cork.

"I have a bottle of Bruenello di Montalcino in the car, couldn't figure out which one you'd prefer so I figured I'd stay on the safe side and bring you both," Gawain hummed, his smile only growing larger when the man noticed his sudden interest.

"You spoil me."

"Perhaps I have ulterior motives," the man admitted, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned back against the china cabinet, his black sports coat straining around his shoulders as he stretched.

"I would have expected nothing less. And let me assure you, the bribery is fully appreciated," he interjected, thumbing the label appreciatively. *The man knew him well.*

"I thought it would be," Gawain said with a smirk, firming his shoulders against the wall before he continued. "After all, there is something to be said for expensive taste," the man added, watching pointedly as he filled his glass, swirling a small amount in the bottom, sampling the bouquet with a reverent sigh as he took the first sip.

"…Though, what I wouldn't give for a cup of Vanora's honeyed ale any day. *Christ*, that woman could brew," Gawain related, taking a small sip from his glass before he set it down on the counter, gaze internal as he smacked his lips appreciatively.

"I attempted to recreate it a few years after you discovered me. But I'm afraid I never quite managed to recreate its likeness," he remarked conversationally, raising his glass for a toast as the Gawain's attention remained elsewhere. Perhaps back in the memories of nights spent under the warm glow of lanterns, the scent of salted pork and spilled ale rising around them as they toasted to their latest victory, their latest brush with death. Galahad's shoulders brushing against his, companionable but flushed before they eventually made their excuses

and tackled one another into their bed, wrestling playfully for the upper hand as the sound of the celebration filtered through the warm fall air.

"Shame," Gawain replied, shaking himself out of his reverie and hurrying to mirror the action. His wine sloshed dangerously close to the rim as he rose to his feet and raised his glass.

"To Vanora's ale then."

"That's not all of Vanora I would toast to," Gawain chuckled as their glasses clinked together. "They just don't make hips like that anymore," the man hummed, shaking his head as his hand flicked back and forth in front of them like a pendulum, making appreciative sounds until he couldn't help but join the man in his good humor.

Privately, he couldn't help but agree. Vanora had been a force to be reckoned with, as beautiful as a summer's day and twice as deadly. People had often said that her and Bors had been made for one another. The gods had seen fit to grace the man with the one woman who was his match in both wit and temper. At the end of the day, a man couldn't ask for much more than that. Their marriage had come as no surprise to those closest to them, but was certainly not popular when the scores of men, both young and old who'd wanted her for their own, realized she'd been stolen from right under their noses, married to a foreigner no less.

They finished their wine in relative silence, each caught up in their respective thoughts as the hour grew late. But soon enough he was up and moving again, his body reminding him how long it had been since he'd last ate as he moved seamlessly through the kitchen, collecting everything he needed for a meal for two.

He gave the man a collection of vegetables to chop, more to keep his hands busy than anything else as he collected the two packages of lean thigh from the fridge that he'd left to thaw overnight. Their supper this evening was courtesy of a particularly supple receptionist he'd had the misfortune of meeting nearly a month before. He'd been meaning to use up the last of her, and the man's arrival, while not completely surprising, provided him with the perfect opportunity.

"You knew I was coming," Gawain observed, eying the meat speculatively as he minced a pair of radishes into tidy piles near the edge of the cutting board.

"I had my suspicions," he returned, deftly slicing the lips on the packages and sliding the meat onto the cutting board with a practiced flick. "After all Atlanta isn't an unreasonable distance to travel, especially considering the circumstances," he replied, gesturing vaguely with the meat tenderizer before he made to continue.

"In fact, I'm surprised Dagonet didn't accompany you," he posed, calculating travel times as he sprinkled each cut with a measure of flour and proceeded to flatten both pieces with the tenderizer.

"It's his week with the kids," Gawain replied, raising his voice enough to be heard above the din, shaking his head almost disbelievingly as if something had just occurred to him. "Christ,

I'm glad I hadn't gotten around to having kids before all this," he grunted, waving the knife above his head in an emphatic gesture.

"It wouldn't be fair to them, you know, being away all the time. Not knowing if Arthur will call tomorrow or the next night, or if I have to catch a red-eye to the bloody Pope-palace in less time than is humanly feasible. Hell, it was bad enough when Sandra left. Imagine explaining *that* to a bunch of kids?" Gawain snorted, lopping the ends off a bunch of carrots rather violently, as if to prove his point.

"She said I was a completely different person and, honestly, she wasn't wrong. Finding all this out changed a lot of things. Not that I regret it mind you," he hastened to add, clearly conflicted but firm in his decision.

He understood the feeling, the difficulty that had come part and parcel with the conflicting realities that had fused together to become one. In some cases it didn't work out as smoothly as they'd hoped. He'd been lucky; he had no one who knew him well enough to notice. Perhaps Bedelia had picked up on fragments of it, perhaps she'd even been able to tell the difference in the sessions following his revelation and the subsequent months spent almost solely with Arthur and his brothers. He knew the sudden nature of his leave of absence in the days following their reunion had piqued her interest. He'd called it a holiday, but deep down he knew she had her doubts. It had been a challenge reigning himself in when he'd returned, his dual natures still settling as he forced himself to meet her gaze, session after session, playing a game of cat and mouse, only there were no mice in the room, only predators.

But at the end of the day, despite her gifts, the woman could only speculate. He only allowed her enough of himself to wonder. And quite frankly, that was the way he wanted to keep it.

"At least Dagonet and his ex split before all this, stress of the military life I suppose, never really asked actually. You know how he is, still as talkative as ever," Gawain continued, taking a fortifying sip of his wine before he made to speak again, the pause pregnant and full.

"You know his youngest boy's name is Lucan, right? The boy was born eight years *before* we found him. *Eight*. Hard to believe isn't it?" Gawain added, words weighted with experiences and memories he himself had missed.

"Our unconscious minds are often mirrors of our deepest desires," he replied. "Given our histories, it is not surprising that elements from our past, strong emotions and desires had slipped into this one long before we knew our true identities," he finished, his expression thoughtful as he rolled up his sleeves, salting the meat lightly before he crossed to the fridge, retrieving a handful of fresh limes to add a more exotic tang.

"Bors took him in you know, Lucan, raised him as one of his own, the kid was still ticking by the time I passed on. Became a stone mason, married a woad girl, a pretty little blond half his height. He ended up taller than even Dagonet," the man mused, a smile flittering across his features as he shrugged out of his sports coat, leaning over the sink as he took the peeler to a mound of potatoes.

"What about you Tris, I know you weren't fond of the idea of a brood of your own back then, has that changed?" the man asked, more curious than anything as he popped a piece of potato

into his mouth and bit down with a satisfied crunch.

He raised a brow, but let the old nickname slide. A lot of things had changed since that night in the clearing, but on the other hand, many things had also stayed the same.

"It wasn't that I disliked the idea," he posed, pausing over the meat as he gave himself time to truly consider the question. "It was more that I couldn't visualize it. At the time I didn't see a future where they would be possible. And in a way, I certainly wasn't wrong."

"And now?" the man asked.

"Up until a few weeks ago my opinions on the matter were the same. But recently, certain events have made me more open to reconsideration," he admitted, selecting a bottle of shallot oil from the counter as he coated one of his pans and tossed the meat in to fry.

The meat hit the pan with a satisfying hiss of oil and natural fats. He breathed in, sampling the aroma, idly wondering if the woman's tearful mother, who'd been featured on national TV as late as last week pleading for her daughter's safe return, would take comfort in knowing that her daughter was host to a most intriguing flavor. There was a certain sweetness about her, something that added an almost natural smokiness he found appealing. *Refreshing even.*

"Ah, right, the whole Minnesota shrike business, it's been all over the news. People at the department are still talking about it. You're referring to that Hobbs girl, right? She pulled through then?" Gawain remarked, sounding far less surprised than he'd expected as the man finished with the vegetables and dug the tip of the knife into the cutting board.

"So it seems," he replied carefully, pausing for a moment before deciding to share his thoughts. "And it appears we have more in common than even I initially realized," he continued, his long fingers curling around the handle of the bread knife as he took a loaf of soft German rye and cut off half a dozen slices.

Gawain just raised a brow. "That so?" his expression contemplative as he leaned back in his chair, grinning a bit as he made to continue, "I probably don't want to know so I'm not going to ask."

"Wise of you," he offered, smiling as he flipped the meat with a graceful flick of his wrist.

The man laughed. "I've known you a long time Tristan, two lifetimes in fact. So I'd *better* know when to keep my mouth shut by now," Gawain grinned, a dark little chuckle echoing out into the relative quiet as he raised his glass in response.

"I'll drink to that."

Chapter 26

"I must admit that I'm surprised you managed to get leave so quickly. I only made my discovery a bit over a fortnight ago," he commented, selecting some fresh herbs for a quick pesto, still savoring the taste of the fine wine against his tongue as he took another overly indulgent sip.

"I didn't, not exactly," Gawain replied, chasing a smattering of crumbs across the kitchen counter, "I convinced my super that one of the department's cold cases could benefit from a road trip."

"Which cold case are you referring to, if you don't mind me asking?" he inquired, quietly curious.

"Not one of yours," the other man replied dismissively, "just an old blood bath that happened on the border – actually, now that you mention it, it *was* one of the weird ones. That kind of shit tends to bleed together the longer you're on the force. But I remember even the older guys in the department kept saying they'd never seen anything like it."

He stayed silent, mincing a respectable pile of herbs as he waited for the man to continue.

"There was a man and woman, husband and wife, who'd been split in half at the torso. Only whoever had done it had actually reattached them as well, sewn them right up and everything, only the woman's bottom half was on the man's body and his on hers. Their hearts were missing, so were their lungs, the man's liver and a piece of the woman's right flank," Gawain imparted.

"They had been propped up, arranged so they were facing each other at the only picnic table in the entire state park that *directly* rode the state line. One was in Georgia and the other in South Carolina. The asshole knew it too, had too. It was a bloody jurisdictional nightmare, parks and services were there, the feds, state and highway, hell, pretty sure the CIA might have popped in for a few hours, though no one was actually able to say why," Gawain explained, rolling his eyes marginally, as if to highlight the collective folly of internal politics.

The knife that had been mincing steadily through the pile of herbs slowed – if only for a moment. The other man didn't notice.

"It was thirteen years ago, give or take a few months. Originally the feds thought it was a targeted kill, something planned through a third party, but that changed pretty quickly," Gawain recalled, "both vics were doctors at Emory University Hospital. And in my department's defense, at first it seemed like a normal, cut and dry homicide. You know, *despite* the crazy."

"Only obviously it wasn't. It seems *someone* had a taste for the dramatic, because on top of the missing organs and the whole leg swap thing, their hands were also missing. That's when things got complicated. It wasn't until they took a closer look at their records that they

discovered they were basically *drowning* in malpractice suits. She had a drinking problem that was starting to affect her work and he was just incompetent. His instructors had fudged his records in med school to pass him through the program - mostly due to pressure from the governor, old family friends and all that," Gawain snorted, smoothing a hand down his long ponytail before he took another sip of wine.

"Someone was sending a message," he commented, sprinkling a layer of herbs into the food processor before flipping the switch, letting it pulse for a few seconds before turning it off and sampling the flavor.

"And with style," the man returned. "We still don't know if it was someone that knew them personally or some casual observer, but we're pretty sure that the last accidental death was the final straw for our housecleaning psychopath," Gawain remarked bluntly.

"The wife botched a middle aged man's liver transplant and nearly killed him – and the man, well, he nicked a bundle of nerves mid-surgery, ended up paralyzing a twelve year old girl after a major car accident," the man continued, making a disgusted noise in the back of his throat as he took another fortifying sip of wine.

He nodded politely, eyes focused on the task at hand as he removed the blade from the food processor and whisked a few tablespoons of olive oil into the mixture. He watched out of the corner of his eye as the man reached down, unzipping his shoulder bag and nodding towards one of the file folders inside. The case file looked intriguingly thin for a crime of its caliber, likely one of the reasons why Gawain's superiors had been eager to agree to anything regarding the man's sudden interest in the case. Cold cases had a tendency to haunt the departments that were responsible for solving them, and a thirteen year old cold case never looked good come election season.

"Do you really think there is anything more that can be gleaned from the evidence the department has already collected? Or was it truly just an excuse to come visit?" he asked lightly.

"Well, naturally I'd like to catch the bastard," the man posed. "But honestly, when you really break it down, whoever killed them seems to have done the hospital a favor – malpractice suits are way down, or at least nowhere near as frequent as twelve or thirteen years ago. So, at the end of the day, I guess fate has a way or working things out all by herself," Gawain admitted, playing with the stem of his glass as his free hand idly flipped through the pages of the case file.

There was a flash of bottle-blond hair, disheveled and tangled as the man paged through the photos, shots taken at different angles that highlighted the way both victims' arms ended at the wrists, bloody, yet clean-cut. *Neat*. There were even close ups of the sutures that connected the husband's lower body to his wife's torso, and so on. The stitching wasn't just functional or clinical, it was *elegant*.

The man caught his gaze, and after a few heated seconds he feigned disinterest, casually turning his attention back to dinner as he lowered the heat on the meat.

But when he turned away, bending down to put away the food processor and retrieve the stand mixer from the bottom cupboard, his lips twitched upwards - the hallmark of a remarkably satisfied looking smile.

Chapter 27

It was only when they were sitting down to dinner that he finally broached the subject of the man's arrival.

"So, Gawain, what brings you here?" he asked, knife sliding easily though the butter soft filet of meat as he eyed the man through the veil of his lashes. *Considering.*

"You know why I'm here. How is he?" Gawain snorted, chewing lightly before stabbing his fork into a piece of cauliflower, frustrated yet appreciative as he moved on to sample the meat.

"Things are progressing as expected," he replied. "I realize that it must seem slow, especially to an outside observer, but I am making progress," he elaborated, cautiously parting with more information than he was strictly comfortable with when it became clear that the man wasn't going to be easily satisfied. Admittedly he was keeping this business with Will close to his chest, he couldn't afford any mistakes. At this point, any outside interference, *especially* from the others, could prove disastrous in terms of Will's mental state.

He could lose Galahad again. *This time, potentially forever.*

"The others are getting frustrated," Gawain returned, blowing out a breath between his teeth as he ran a calloused hand through his hair. "Don't get me wrong, I understand your caution, especially considering what you've told us, told Arthur. But honestly, I can't help thinking we'll all be better off when this is over."

"Hell, the sooner the better and you know it," the man continued, "we're incomplete, there is a hole, an *absence* that none of us particularly relish. We can't go on this way Tristan."

He nodded, understanding. "I feel the same way. But Galahad's condition is delicate," he allowed, voice calm despite the fact that he set down his utensils, meeting Gawain's gaze from across the table as the man waved his fork in the air, as if to further punctuate his point.

The younger man frowned. "I don't understand, I nearly had a heart attack when Arthur and Lancelot came for me. Bors beat the stuffing out of us the first time and Dagonet nearly got Lancelot, Arthur and I *arrested*. Hell, you nearly *killed* Arthur. Part of me wonders how bad the pup could really be," Gawain pointed out, the hint of a challenge resting in the back of his gaze as he let frustration get the better of him.

"In Galahad's case, it is not the physical I am worried about, it's the mental," he replied, voice clear of any frustration as he attempted to order his thoughts. This was Gawain after all, *family*, he *deserved* to know.

"Have you heard anything from Arthur?" Gawain asked, letting the moment rest as he took a generous sip of wine.

"Not since I called. He left Italy the following day, but didn't say to where - I believe Lancelot and Bors went with him."

"Probably coming here," Gawain grunted, "he has a condo in New York or Los Angeles or something, maybe both, *probably both* - it's hard to keep track sometimes."

"I would be surprised if they hadn't," he responded, picking up his utensils again and taking a careful bite of meat, "they'll want to be close, for Galahad's sake as well as their own."

He took it as his due when the man only nodded in response. After all, he knew what the man was thinking. In fact, he could practically *feel* the anticipation, it was a visceral thing now, *tangible*, something that could be breathed in and experienced rather than simply believed. He knew Gawain could feel it too, they all could.

The man surprised him when he changed the subject.

"Did you ever go back? Home, I mean?" Gawain asked, fiddling with his butter knife as he tested the balance of the blade. The look on the man's face was so reminiscent of the one he used to get while throwing knives that it almost made him do a double take.

"I booked a plane ticket from Arthur's villa and traveled there after we parted ways, just outside Rome," he replied easily, completely truthful as he sliced into a roasted garlic and dill potato, "yourself?"

"I did, once."

"Only once?" he inquired, Gawain's answer surprising him as he managed to catch him off guard for the second time in so many minutes. "You've known who you are for almost seven years longer than myself and you have only returned once?"

The man's expression twisted.

"There's a supermarket where my old house used to be and a parking lot built on top of the graves of four of my children," Gawain replied, tone dark as the base of his wine glass hit the table with just a bit more force than was strictly necessary.

"I apologize," he replied, considering the man's expression before he continued, "obviously not the homecoming you'd expected?"

"More like *exactly* what I expected, not that it made it any easier. You know that saying? That you can never really go home again? It's true," the man imparted. "Hell, I can't even go in museums anymore. I'm too afraid I'll recognize part of the exhibit - the *people*. It's an odd world we live in," the man grunted.

"That we are here, talking today, is nothing short of extraordinary. To entreat fate to roll the dice again, is a favor she does not grant for everyone," he observed, taking a measured sip from his wineglass before daubing his lips with the serviette.

"But why us though? I still can't wrap my head around it, no matter what Arthur says. Why not Percival or Kay? Erec, Pellinor or Dinadan?" the man questioned, listing off just a sample

of their fallen brothers, knights who had once sat beside them at the great table. Men who had fallen in battle long before the Bishop had sailed for Britain.

Why indeed.

It wasn't until they'd cleared the table, his crisp white shirt rolled up to the elbows, forearms slick with a fine layer of bubbles, washing the dishes as the other man dried, that Gawain brought up Galahad again.

"He wasn't the same after you died, you know."

"I'm aware," he replied, having heard this particular story more than once. But he didn't stop the man from continuing. It was quite the opposite actually, he hoarded every word, every inflection, every musing. He added every new observation and comment to the masterpiece that existed in his mind. Ever since the moment in the clearing, he'd kept a picture of the man, of *Galahad*, alive in his mind. He'd tended to it, like a mother to a fussy child, a gardener to a particularly difficult plant, creating a record of sorts that extended long after he'd met his end on the blade of that Saxon sword, following Galahad into a future he didn't have an opportunity to see.

He was jealous of it, possessive. And never tired of hearing about the years his brothers had seen, bereft of his presence.

"You parted on unfavorable terms, and that haunted him," Gawain continued, "hell, if you ask me that was what killed him in the end, not the blade or the fist, but a broken heart. He lived fiercely, but in the end, somehow, he just *faded*. Not that he'd ever admit it of course."

His hand paused, the dish cloth growing lax between his fingers as it floated freely in the sudsy water. But otherwise his composure remained unaffected. *Guarded.*

Gawain just looked frustrated.

"He may have been my best friend, but *he* was *yours* and *you* were *his*. When push came to shove there was only so much I *could* do," the man explained, winding the drying towel around and around his fist, creasing the honey-brown fabric thoughtlessly as he plucked a wine glass up by the stem, balancing it perfectly in the palm of his hand for a few tenuous moments before he moved to dry it.

"He settled down eventually, sired an armload of brats. Loved them fiercely, but otherwise you could tell his heart wasn't in it," Gawain commented, "he married a patient woman though, gods bless her, she always knew when to step back, when to give him his space and let him come back to her in his own time."

The hand still underneath the water curled into a surprisingly tight fist, enough to make his fingers ache as he forced himself to settle. *Was it Will's closeness that had elicited such a response? Simple jealousy? Or was it simply the emotions behind the musings themselves? He'd always known that the man had moved on after his passing, at least in a fashion, but he'd never been privy to the details.*

"The irony was that he *did* miss it, the killing. And that desire haunted him. You always seemed to know what he needed. Which, of course, wasn't necessary what he wanted, but in the end you always ended up keeping him on track," Gawain imparted, his thick fingers knuckling through his light brown hair almost thoughtlessly as his eyes remained distant.

He smiled, the expression more internal than anything else as he carefully rinsed the last knife and drained the sink. It was rare to hear the truth of his and Galahad's relationship laid out so bluntly, especially from a party other than themselves. Their relationship had never been a secret, even in the beginning, their love and strong sense of attachment had been accepted with no more than the occasional raised brow from a stranger.

It had been a much simpler time. *Sweeter and certainly far less complicated.*

"After you passed, when you were no longer around to control that balance between want and need, he chose what he *thought* he wanted, what he *hoped* he wanted. But he never found it. Not ever. He needed you there. He needed you there to *force* him…"

He hesitated, uncertain of how much he should reveal as he opened the fridge and took out dessert, a simple citrus mousse. *Gawain deserved to know after all. He had to know what was at stake.*

"Galahad always struggled between want and need," he began, drizzling the delicate moose with a thin trail of chilled caramel and rich, dark chocolate before he handed the man a plate.

"Much like you said, he often fought against the idea of who he was and who he strived to be. Will is much the same. He has two natures, his own and the ones that he is forced to absorb through his work. There is a dissonance there, an inherent confusion that goes far beyond the skin. But with professional guidance, even with his empathy, a more solid sense of self – or at least an awareness of the difference would be easy to ascertain. Except, Will's true nature is also dual, much like yours and mine, a mixture of both the past and the present. But he is not aware of it. Not on a conscious level. No more than we were before Arthur found us," he explained, spoon gliding through the velvety desert as he closed his eyes, sampling the flavor.

Delicious.

"So, in a sense, coming back to himself after each case is harder because deep down, even his mind is at war. He is at siege with his sense of self and has likely been since he got to an age where he could separate his own thoughts from that of his parents," he added, taking another generous bite of his dessert as Gawain's expression grew thoughtful, forehead creased in a troubled frown as he appeared to consider his words.

"And that's why you have to take it slow?" Gawain asked, clearly still on the fence about the entire affair as he trailed the tines of his fork through a pool of caramel syrup.

"Consider it this way," he offered, rearranging the napkin in his lap with a fastidious air, "Will's mind is like a concert hall, only there are a dozen different symphonies playing at once. If you were in his place, what do you think *your* reaction would be?"

"Christ," Gawain murmured, rubbing a hand across his face.

Privately he couldn't agree more. There was a fine line between a challenge and insanity. And Will Graham was already walking the razor wire between them. Only a truly exceptional mind could have survived as long as he had.

But luckily for them, Galahad had always been *exactly* that.

Chapter 28

The call from Jack had been sudden, so sudden that Will was actually pulling on his coat and rushing out the door a full five minutes before the end of their session. A wealthy family had apparently been found murdered in their home, sitting down to dinner in their Sunday best. Will's expression had fishtailed when Jack had filled him in on the details, children, parents, a particularly expensive roast pork steak; the killer had spared no one. *Someone was cleaning house.*

In a way, it almost seemed second nature to offer his services. From the stressed cadence of Agent Crawford's voice, it was apparent that Will would not have the opportunity to drive home nor even make other arrangements for someone to look after his pack of strays. The sincerity behind his offer was genuine when he agreed to stop by and feed the man's canine companions and the gratitude and relief on the man's face had been more than gratifying.

Either way, it certainly suited his purposes.

The drive to Wolf Trap, Virginia was uneventful at best, a stark opposite of the sense of anticipation that was rising in his breast as he took a right off the highway and entered a stretch of rich, farming country that went on as far as the eye could see. He could see why the man had settled here, there was a subtle tranquility to the landscape that almost anyone would find appealing, especially someone who'd spent the majority of his days galloping across distant plains and running through abandoned fields of wheat and barley. For someone who had already experienced the sensation of long grass gliding through his fingers as the shouts of his brothers rose up, wrestling and scrapping in the dust as the days of their childhood had slipped away like water trickling from a scrap of thick cloth, slow but inevitable.

The man didn't lock his doors. Perhaps that was due to the isolated locale or the variable herd of dogs that clamored for his attention as soon as he opened the door and stepped inside. Ironically, however, if the man was counting on a certain element of fear to dissuade any intruders, the reality was almost laughable. Because much like their owner, the dogs were observant, cautious even, but ultimately sweet tempered.

Everything about the man's home exuded a second hand sort of comfort; the furniture was well broken in, yet not threadbare. The décor was perhaps more suited to a man forty years Will's senior and with far less earning potential than he knew the man enjoyed.

He took his time, ignoring the dogs that followed at his heels, trying to sneak licks at his hands or beg scratches; his goal was singular, for as the other man investigated yet another murder, sifting through evidence and inflections from corpses that had long since grown cold, he was doing a bit of investigating of his own.

Will's piano was out of tune, yet his sleep wear, the basics, socks, t-shirts and underwear were abundant and easily accessible. The man's life was in shambles but he took time to organize and fold his clothes, seeking stability, *surety*, at least in one portion of his life. His basic

needs were being met, the laundry was done, the dishes, the garbage, but anything else, anything complicated, was clearly regulated to the side.

It wasn't until he'd finished tying the lure set up at the man's work station, his taste buds still zinging with the coppery tang of his own blood that he noticed the book stand. He bent over, pursuing the titles, mostly old criminology texts from his time at the academy, a smattering of old Fish & Game magazines and selection of light reading. But what truly caught his eye was the dog-eared copy of Arthurian legends that stood out on the middle shelf, crammed in beside a tattered mystery-thriller and the product manual for a 1968 Mercury outboard motor. His eyebrow rose when he noticed the difference in the dust trails. The volume had been taken off the shelf recently, perhaps as early as sometime in the past month. *The chapter pertaining to Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table had been bookmarked.*

That couldn't be merely a coincidence. The man was searching, searching for something he didn't know how to name, how to explain or even justify, but he was searching all the same.

It was only when a minor scuffle broke out behind him between the white Shepard-cross and the wiry little dog with a distinct under bite that he recognized how deeply the symbolism ran. There were seven dogs for seven brothers. The man had unknowingly recreated the brotherhood, forming a new family in the mirror image of the old.

His fingers ran across the edge of the pages, testing the give as he let himself think about what might have driven the man to peruse such a book. Was it simply a flight of fancy, something borne out of restlessness or boredom that had led to him picking up the old tome? Or was it something deeper? Had something of him, something of *Tristan,* managed to get through to the younger man?

And to their credit the dogs simply stared right back at him, their heads cocked, as if perpetually on edge for his next command or perhaps even readying themselves to pounce just in case another link of sausage made a sudden appearance.

And for that, he certainly couldn't blame them, the sausage was particularly good. He should know after all, he'd ground it himself.

He left Will's home with more questions than answers. His mind was rife with what ifs and indecent suppositions as he called the dogs back inside, watching them chase each other through the low brush, rolling in the long grass and generally taking their time about it as he stood in the threshold, neither in nor out, undecided. His conversation with Gawain had never seemed so apt as he considered the course arrowing out before him.

Did he dare push the man any more than he already had? Or did he let nature take its course?

End Notes

A/N #2: I realize this chapter was very, very short, but this is more of a prologue than anything else. The next chapter should be up soon!

Reference: The title of this work is the Italian verb "Rinascere" – meaning 'to be reborn,' 'born again,' or 'to revive.'

"*Land of bear and land of eagle, land that gave us birth and blessing, land that called us ever homewards. We will go home across the mountains. We will go home, we will go home. We will go home across the mountains. We will go home, we will go home. We will go home across the mountains."* – King Arthur soundtrack (from the song featured in the movie "Song of Exile.")

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